The HOUSE of DISAPPEARANCE

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CHAPTER I

THE FIRST VICTIM

IT was a pity there were no small boys on the road that led to Greystones, Brymoor. They missed a rare and imposing spectacle on that lonely, curving way—the spectacle of four uniformed constables and an inspector travelling along it in a motor-car. But, though it was a pity (for life without policemen is a terribly dull affair), it was not surprising. Brymoor was a tiny hamlet falling to bits through lack of communication with the outside world, the nearest fringe of which was found at Galton, three tortuous miles distant; and Greystones, the country seat of John Elderly towards which the rare and imposing spectacle was progressing, was another two miles beyond Brymoor. Then came the big hills and big valleys and the babbling streams, so that, unless you were a walker or an angler, Greystones itself was the only thing to beckon you on.

Yet one pair of eyes did view the spectacle as it rounded a rather precipitous bend a quarter of a mile from John Elderly's gate. A somewhat weary and very dusty labourer, trudging in the same direction, paused as the car approached; and, standing aside to let it overtake him, regarded it with solemn eyes.

"Four and a mob," he murmured, counting the inmates. "Somethink's up. One fer traffic, two fer a drunk, three fer a thief, and four fer a murder."

According to this formula, it could be nothing less than a murder, so he watched the car with interest—to discover,

all at once, that his interest was returned. The constable who was driving, after a quick glance at the inspector, applied the brake and brought the car to a standstill.

"Wot's up?" asked the dusty one.

"P'r'aps you know what's up?" suggested the inspector, glowering at him.

"Me? 'Ow should I know?" demanded the labourer, frowning. "Only thing I know's up is the sky."

"Now, then, no back answers," barked the inspector. "What are you doing here?"

The labourer looked puzzled.

"Walkin'," he said.

"Where to?"

"Greystones. That's it over there, ain't it? Mr. Elderly's place——"

"'Adn't we better be getting on, sir?" interposed one of the constables, regarding the inspector anxiously.

"Yes, yes," replied the inspector, testily. "But—just a minute. I want to know a little more about this man first." He turned again to the pedestrian. "What are you going to Greystones for?"

"Bit curious, ain't yer?" grumbled the labourer.

"Policemen have to be—it's their job!"

"Oh, orl right, then. I'm goin' ter ask fer a bit o' work. Gardenin' work."

"Oh! You know Mr. Elderly, then?"

"No, I don't know 'im. Never seen 'im. But I've 'eard 'e's a good employer, and 'as a tidy bit o' land to look arter." Sudden indignation entered his voice. "Feller may try and git a bit o' work, mayn't 'e? Any law agin' that?"

The inspector was staring at the labourer rather hard. In fact, for a moment his eyes seemed to be piercing him through and through.

"You're quite sure you haven't been to see Mr. Elderly

already, eh?" the inspector demanded, abruptly. "You didn't turn round, for instance, when you heard us coming, eh?"

"'Course not!" responded the labourer, his indignation growing. "Turn round agin! Wotcher gettin' at?"

"You'll know soon enough, maybe. Jump in. We'll give you a lift." The labourer hesitated. "GET IN!" roared the inspector. "Are you deaf?"

Five to one was too stiff, especially when the five were in uniform. So the labourer shrugged his shoulders. After all, a ride was a ride, whatever your company.

"Orl right," he muttered, and took his seat gingerly in the back of the car. "So long as yer ain't chargin' anything."

"P'r'aps the charge'll come later, my son," the inspector snapped back; and the car leapt forward once more.

Inside the gate, two people were discussing the weather. A good-looking young man, short, stocky, and freckled, was swearing with ridiculous optimism that the sun would soon blaze forth. An attractive young lady, brown-haired, brown-eyed, and with the perfect slimness envied by fair and forty, was contending that grey clouds meant rain, especially when smudgy black blobs floated disconnectedly across the horizon.

"Well, we'll have to toss for it," suggested the young man. "Heads, sun—tails, the flood."

"No, really," replied the young lady. "We should get simply soaked."

"It wouldn't kill us."

"It would ruin our clothes. Your lovely trousers—I'm sure they'd never look the same again!"

"Rot!" he laughed. "Let me fetch your mackintosh, Angela. Tell me where it is——"

She held up her hand, and he stopped as a faint murmur of thunder echoed through the hills.

"There's your answer, Peter," she exclaimed. "Listen!"

"H'm," he frowned.

He tried to listen to the thunder, but found himself thinking of her hand instead. It was a capable hand, the fingers artistic and slender. He liked artistic hands. He was himself an artist of sorts. He wondered . . .

"Did you hear it?" she challenged.

"I did," he admitted gloomily. "And I also heard it two months ago in London, when we managed to forget it under a single umbrella!"

"But I was soaked when I got back to my studio."

"And I was drenched when I got back to mine. Gloriously drenched. Well, well, so be it. Let us go inside and play spillikins!"

In spite of the thunder, and this sound meteorological decision, neither of them moved. There is magic in the moment that precedes a storm. Something unnameable stirs within one; the heart flutters, just as the leaves do; mystery enters to upset nice calculations, and all the painstaking achievements of man seem suddenly dwarfed in the passage of a greater Presence that has callously evolved them, and will one day just as callously swallow them up. We do not analyse these things, but we dimly sense them when the thunder reverberates through the hills, or a cool breeze suddenly makes the still roses shiver, or a black cat flashes out on to the lawn and chases its tail.

But possibly other elements made the man and the girl linger by the gate. They may have been listening to an inner storm that was about to break with glorious confusion in their own souls—or to the sound of an approaching motor-car containing four constables, an inspector, and a labourer after a job. That car itself was not approaching on a peaceful mission. A number of storms circled round Brymoor this morning.

As the car neared the gate, Peter raised his head, and a

gardener who had been standing outside the lodge, with a queer apprehensive expression on his face, disappeared quickly into the shadows of a wall.

"Hallo!" observed Peter. "Here are some folk who aren't afraid of the weather, anyway!"

The girl was about to reply when her words died on her lips.

"What's the matter?" asked Peter, anxiously.

But he did not need an answer. The car was stopping outside the gate, and now he, too, noticed the character of the occupants. Not only their character, but their obviously business-like demeanour. The inspector sprang out briskly, and was through the gate in a second.

"Where's Mr. Elderly?" he barked, without ceremony.

"I'm sure I don't know," answered the young man.

"I believe my uncle is in his study," added Angela. "He usually is at this time of the morning."

"Mr. Elderly's your uncle?" asked the inspector, sharply.

"That is the implication," Peter replied for her, dryly.

The inspector stared at them hard. It was a habit of his. Then, making up his mind rapidly, he turned to his men and issued a sharp order:

"Stay by the gate, Dawkins, and see that nobody passes out. Nobody, mind. Don't let 'em argue. *You* come along with us." This to the labourer, who, Peter noted, looked thoroughly perplexed. "And *you* two follow me to the house." The last remark was addressed to Peter and Angela. Its commanding tone irritated the young man. But this was not the moment, evidently, for a debate on the ethics of courtesy. Without more ado, the inspector turned and ran up the drive, with three constables behind him.

"Goodness! What's happened?" gasped Angela.

"We'll soon know," replied Peter; and all at once he

walked close to her and patted her arm. "Don't worry yet, Angela," he said. "I expect it's not as bad as it seems. But—if it *is* bad—well, I'm here, for what I'm worth."

"That's a lot, Peter," she answered, with a grateful glance; and they turned to follow the inspector.

The constable named Dawkins, who had been deputed to guard the gate, gazed at the retreating backs till they were swallowed up by the curve of the drive, and then cast his eyes towards the lodge. A hesitating figure emerged from the shadows. It was the figure of the gardener.

"Wot's it all about?" asked the gardener.

If he had ever been handsome (and there was no sign that he ever had been), a scar on his chin would have robbed him of his last beauty. His eyes were closely set, and his hair was sandy. Constable Dawkins regarded him unlovingly.

"Ask no questions, my lad, and you won't be told no lies," the constable observed, oracularly.

"I don't want to be told no lies," retorted the ill-visaged gardener. "I wants to know wot's 'appenin' at the 'ouse."

Constable Dawkins made no response.

"And I wants to know 'oo that feller is you've brought along," went on the gardener.

Constable Dawkins frowned.

"Young feller," he said, "you want to know too much. And p'r'aps you'll be lucky—there's no tellin'—if one day nobody ain't as curious about you as you are about other people. Meantime, if there's any questions to be asked, they'll be asked of Inspector Biggs. Or, more likely," he added, with a wink, "*by* 'im!"

The gardener was silenced. He disappeared round the back of the lodge, and strove, not very successfully, to give his full attention to potatoes.

At the same moment, Inspector Biggs was on the door-

step of Greystones, peremptorily demanding admittance of a butler who, all gravity and side-whiskers, was the very model of what a butler should be. The butler listened unemotionally, but raised his eyebrows when the inspector asked to be shown to Mr. Elderly's study.

"I'll find out whether you can see him," answered the butler.

"You'll do nothing of the sort," retorted the inspector, brushing past him. "The police don't need appointments."

"Excuse me—" began the butler.

"Be quiet!" snapped the inspector. He gazed round the spacious entrance hall, at the antlers on the walls, at the wide staircase, at the generous, mellow rugs. He gazed at the immaculate, slightly outraged butler. His eyes grew puzzled. "The study, man!" he shouted. "The study! Where is it?"

"This way," said the butler, regaining his composure.

But this was not the butler's day. He soon lost his composure again. As the procession proceeded along a blue-carpeted passage, at the end of which was a dark oak door, the butler was again rudely pushed aside by the inspector, who sprang forward and reached the door first. A quick knock—a turn of the handle—the door remained closed.

"Locked," reported Inspector Biggs, and called through, "Mr. Elderly! It's the police, sir! Mr. Elderly!"

Other figures came hurrying up, among them Angela and Peter.

"What's happened, inspector—what's happened?" cried the girl.

"We'll know in a minute," replied the inspector, grimly. "When we've burst this door open."

"I believe I can manage it, sir," interposed one of the constables.

"Right, Newton—carry on," nodded Biggs. "But be quick, for God's sake." As the constable tinkered with the lock, the

inspector turned to Angela. "You're Mr. Elderly's niece, I understand?" he queried.

"Yes," she answered, while her heart thumped.

"Miss Elderly?"

"No—Miss Vernon."

"Thank you. When did you last see your uncle?"

"At breakfast—about two hours ago."

The inspector regarded her thoughtfully, nodded, and then swung round to the door again.

"Hurry up, Newton! Hurry!" he rasped. "If you can't——"

"In a second, sir," murmured the constable. "I'm just getting it." The next instant he gave an exclamation. "Got it!" he cried, and swung the door open.

The interior of the study was now revealed. Two chairs were overturned. Papers littered the floor. A drawer of a desk was open. A smashed vase lay on the ground. The window was fastened on the inside. The room was empty.

CHAPTER II

QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

FOR a few seconds, nobody spoke. Something inexplicable had happened—the inspector's expression showed that—but what that inexplicable thing was only the inspector himself, and possibly his stolid constables, appeared to know. At first, amazement spread over his face. He stared at the fastened window, at the door that had been locked, at the overturned and disarranged furniture. Then he frowned, and became thoughtful. His eyes travelled to the telephone . . .

"The receiver's off," he said sharply.

He ran to the desk on which the instrument stood. On the point of snatching up the receiver, he changed his mind, and lifted it slowly and carefully. He listened, then replaced the receiver in the exact position in which he had found it. Peter noted with interest that he did not hang it up again.

Like a pistol shot came his next order: "No one's to leave." A tall, elderly man standing just inside the door raised his head quickly, and suddenly came to life.

"Isn't that rather peremptory?" he asked.

"In the circumstances, no," answered Biggs.

"What are the circumstances?" the elderly man enquired. "Then, perhaps, we can judge whether we agree with you or not."

Inspector Biggs studied the speaker for an instant, then deliberately ignored him. Turning to the constable who had opened the door, he said,

"That's an order, Newton. No one to leave this place without my permission. I want the house and the grounds searched

immediately. You and Smith can do the house, and Druce will go out and do the grounds with Dawkins. You understand?"

"Yes, sir," replied Constable Newton, and turned to go.

"Wait a minute!" cried the inspector. "Wait a minute! Do you know what you're looking for?"

The constable coloured slightly as he admitted that he did not.

"You're looking for Mr. Elderly, or for the last person who has seen him," said Biggs. "Have everybody brought inside—the staff, outdoor and indoor, to wait in the kitchen, and the rest to me here. Now, then—lively! Step out, my lads!"

The constables saluted, and vanished. The tall, elderly man tried again.

"I am sure you believe you are doing your duty, inspector," he observed, controlling his annoyance with obvious difficulty, "but, I repeat, your methods are peremptory. We are all friends of Mr. Elderly—we are here at his invitation, in fact—and if anything unfortunate has happened to him we shall be as anxious as you to lend our assistance——"

"You can do that, sir, by assisting the law," interposed the inspector.

"Granted," nodded the elderly man, quietly, "but, in a sense, I also represent the law. I am Sir Julius Hughes, a member of His Majesty's Parliament."

This information had some effect, though not a great deal. The inspector refused to give ground, but he spoke more temperately.

"I've no wish to make myself unnecessarily unpleasant, I'm sure," he replied, "but when I've got a duty to perform, it's my habit to perform it. And my duty at this moment is to see that nobody leaves this place. When you hear what I've got to say, you'll maybe agree."

"We are waiting to hear what you have to say," murmured Sir Julius, patiently.

"Then it's this," went on the inspector, with a grim expression. "Mr. Elderly rang the police station up at half-past ten." He glanced at a clock on the mantelpiece. "That's twenty-five minutes ago. His voice was excited. It was more than excited—it was terror-stricken." A little gasp escaped from Mr. Elderly's niece, and the young man by her side moved a little closer. "He asked us to come at once, and he was beginning to say more when—something interrupted him." He stopped abruptly, and shrugged his shoulders. His eyes were now on Sir Julius.

"Go on," said Sir Julius.

"There's not much more to say—yet," replied Inspector Biggs. "Now you know nearly as much as I do. Someone, of course, knows more. We came along here as soon as we could, found the study door locked, with no key in it, the window locked, and the room empty, as you all see it. If Mr. Elderly left the room after telephoning to us, well, my men will probably find him somewhere in the house or the grounds. But if he didn't leave the room—where is he?" He paused, and no one attempted to answer the question. "It's a mystery, and there's only one clear thing about it," the inspector added, and fell back upon his old formula. "No one leaves this place until either Mr. Elderly is found, or I have handed the matter over to somebody in higher authority."

The inspector's statement cleared the air a little. Nobody liked him; his manner was too curt and officious; but all agreed that, from his point of view, he had a case.

"What do you propose to do?" asked Sir Julius Hughes, "Get into touch with headquarters?"

"That's impossible at the moment," responded the inspector, frowning.

"Why not the telephone?" suggested Peter.

"The telephone wires are cut," answered the inspector.

Peter felt a little shiver against his side.

"Beastly rotten, I know," he whispered. "But it'll come out all right, Angela—you'll see!"

"It's horrible!" Angela murmured back.

As the inspector was beginning to speak again, a sudden burst of thunder drowned his words. A pale shaft of sunlight that had lain on the carpet and across a fallen chair suddenly vanished, and a faint patter sounded outside. The rain was sweeping from the hills, and the outposts had arrived.

For no reason which he could explain, Peter fought an abrupt desire to laugh. He had mentally stepped outside the arena of actual happenings, and was watching it. The electricity, perhaps. Everybody looked very odd from this new, impersonal angle—standing there, while the rain swept towards them, and doing nothing.

"What's the matter with us?" he cried, startling the room with the loudness of his voice. "Let's *all* search!"

The inspector barked back at him, however.

"No, leave it to my men," he retorted. "If there's anything to be found, they'll find it. Meanwhile, I want you all here. I've some questions to ask, and the first is—can anyone here throw any light at all upon Mr. Elderly's movements?"

"I saw him about an hour ago," volunteered Sir Julius. "I didn't notice anything unusual about him."

"Where did you see him?"

"It was in this room."

"May I ask what happened?"

"Certainly. We had arranged to go fishing this afternoon, and I showed him some new flies."

"He did not suggest cancelling the engagement?"

"On the contrary, he said he was looking forward to it."

"Ah," murmured the inspector. "Then he had no knowl-

edge of anything that might interfere with the engagement. H'm." He revolved this point, then jerked out, "Was he alone when you saw him?"

"No. His secretary—Miss Ayrton—was taking down a letter." Sir Julius turned towards a tall, pale girl, who was standing near him. The inspector's eye followed his. "And his niece, Miss Vernon, was leaving the room as I entered."

Inspector Biggs rounded upon Angela like a swooping eagle.

"You told me you hadn't seen him since breakfast," he exclaimed.

Angela flushed, and Peter felt an intense desire to punch the inspector's nose.

"I—I made a mistake," faltered Angela. "I'd forgotten that I went to ask him for a stamp."

"Well, I hope you'll be more careful not to forget in future," responded the inspector, gruffly. "Small mistakes like that sometimes lead to grave results." Peter decided that, one day, he *would* punch the inspector's nose. "And is that all you can tell me?" the inspector asked, turning back to Sir Julius.

"That's all," nodded Sir Julius.

The tall, pale girl now became the centre of the inspector's interest. She had large, quiet eyes—eyes that were difficult to read—and she stiffened slightly, as though in expectation of an encounter. The only other woman in the room, a good-looking though rather sharp-featured matron, watched the secretary closely during her cross-examination. "Why?" wondered Peter suddenly. "That seems to be more than idle curiosity!"

"You were with Mr. Elderly when Sir Julius left?" Inspector Biggs was enquiring.

"Yes," answered Miss Ayrton, quietly.

"What time did Sir Julius leave? You remember?"

"Yes. It was just after ten."

"And how long were you with him after that?"

The secretary paused. She thought carefully for a few moments, and then said,

"Nearly ten minutes."

"Bringing the time up to 10.10," exclaimed the inspector. "Twenty minutes before he telephoned to the police-station!"

"If he telephoned to the police-station at half-past ten, that would be twenty minutes before he telephoned," agreed Miss Ayrton.

Her tone was dry, and seemed to irritate the inspector. He looked at her sharply. So did the matronly woman.

"I see we can both do arithmetic," observed the inspector. "What happened in those ten minutes—the last ten minutes you were with Mr. Elderly?"

"He finished the letter he was dictating. And——"

"Yes?"

"And he gave me some telegrams to send."

"Telegrams? Ah!" The inspector was now staring at Miss Ayrton very hard indeed. "May I enquire——"

He paused abruptly, but the secretary answered his unfinished question.

"They were to three or four guests who had been coming here to-morrow," she said, almost defiantly. "The telegrams asked them not to come. Mr. Elderly gave no reason. He said he would write and explain, and ask them up another time."

"Well, that seems rather extraordinary," exclaimed Inspector Biggs. "Put them off, eh? I take it, you don't know the explanation?"

Miss Ayrton hesitated for a fraction of a second, then shook her head. The inspector grunted.

"Well, we'll leave that for the moment," he said.

But here Sir Julius interposed.

"Don't you think it would be interesting to know if those telegrams were sent?" he suggested.

The inspector frowned.

"Who's conducting this enquiry?" he demanded, sharply.

"You are," replied Sir Julius, unruffled. "That is why I suggest that you put the question, and not I."

"They were sent," said Miss Ayrton, quickly.

"Are you satisfied?" enquired the inspector, with a little sneer, to the Member of His Majesty's Parliament.

"Not quite," answered Sir Julius. "It would be interesting to know how the telegrams were sent? There is no telegraph office at Brymoor, and the nearest is at Galton, five miles away. Has Miss Ayrton, or anyone else, been over to Galton in the last hour?"

Miss Ayrton looked at the inspector.

"Yes, tell us," nodded Biggs.

"I sent the telegrams over the telephone," said the secretary. "No one was going to Galton."

"And the telegrams, of course, were urgent?"

It was again Sir Julius's question. The girl nodded. The inspector now chipped in again quickly, lest he should lose his status and authority.

"You telephoned them from this room, I suppose?" he asked.

"Yes, sir."

"When?"

"Immediately after he gave them to me. Just before I left."

"Then the telephone wires weren't cut at ten past ten," commented Sir Julius; and fell back again, as though he had made an important point and the Opposition could now get on with it.

The matronly lady had little to say. Her name was Mrs. Catesby. Yes, Catesby. She acted as hostess and housekeeper

for Mr. Elderly, who was a bachelor. Yes, he was a bachelor. She had not seen him since breakfast. She had been busy getting the rooms ready for the new guests, most of whom were to have arrived that afternoon, or on the morrow. No, she did not notice anything strange about Mr. Elderly's attitude. Nothing at all. He seemed just as usual.

Angela and Peter, when their turns came, corroborated Mrs. Catesby's assurance that Mr. Elderly had behaved quite naturally that morning. Beyond this they had no useful contribution to offer.

"And does that complete all the guests who are here at present?" asked the inspector.

"No, there is one more," replied Mrs. Catesby. "Mr. Grinton."

"Why isn't he here?" demanded the inspector.

"He probably will be here in a jiffy," said Peter, turning towards the window and gazing out at the dripping garden. "He went out on a botanical expedition as soon as breakfast was over."

"I'll interview him later," answered the inspector. "Then that covers everybody, apart from the staff?"

"Wot abart me?" enquired a voice.

It was the voice of the labourer whom the inspector had brought along with him, and whom he appeared to have forgotten. The man had been standing unobtrusively in the shadow, and now he emerged into full light. He was the incongruous blot on the picture, the one thing that did not seem to have any natural place in it. . . .

All eyes were turned upon him. All save Peter's. A queer, subconscious alertness had entered into that young man, fanned by half-a-dozen trivial incidents and impressions, and instead of looking at the labourer he found himself looking at Mr. Elderly's secretary. He alone saw the sudden light of terror that shot into her eyes, and the fierce momentary

battle, during which her body became rigid, while she conquered her emotion. "I wonder how much the inspector would give to have seen what I've just seen?" thought Peter, an instant later. It did not occur to him to enlighten the inspector, and when that worthy next glanced in the secretary's direction, she was her usual quiet and composed self.

Certainly Inspector Biggs was not worrying about Miss Ayrton at the moment. Adopting his usual method when on the point of cross-examining, he fixed his eyes upon the labourer, while the labourer stared back at him. It was the labourer who first spoke.

"Git on with it," he said.

"I'll get on with it, my son, don't you worry," replied the inspector. "And I'll begin by telling you that civility will be your best tone to adopt."

"Go on," retorted the labourer. "If I've done the old man in, bein' perlite won't git me off."

This blunt statement caused a little shudder to pass round the room.

"Yus, and if I *ain't* done 'im in," went on the labourer, warming up, "yer can't 'ang me fer bein' rude. I ain't sure you've got a right ter drag me in 'ere, any'ow!"

"Be quiet!" cried the inspector. "I've a right to do as I like with suspicious characters!"

"Oh—I'm suspishus, am I?"

"If you want the truth, you are! Now, then, quit any more nonsense, my man! What's your name?"

"Geary," said the labourer. "George."

"Where do you come from?"

This needed thinking over.

"Well," explained George Geary, after a pause, "I was born in Bedford, I ain't got no present address, and nobody's give me word yet where I'm goin' to die."

"Idiot! Where did you sleep last night?"

"In a barn."

"What sort of a barn?"

"Wooden barn."

"Very helpful information! Let's hear where this wooden barn was?"

"Well, yer arst me wot sort of a barn," grumbled Geary. "If I ain't givin' the answers yer want, yer must tell me wot to say. Come ter that, I ain't sure now as it was wood. Might 'ave been brick."

Inspector Biggs just contrived to control himself.

"I am no longer interested in the building material of the barn," he said. "It can have been made of bamboo, for all I care. What I am now asking you is—where *was* it?"

"Oh, where was it? It was t'other side of a town. That's where I slep'—with rats fer comp'ny."

"And what did you do when you woke up?"

"Shaved and put on me plus fours."

"Did you have any breakfast?"

"Yus."

"Where?"

"At the town."

"Do you know the name of the town?"

"Yus. Galton."

"Then why didn't you say so? What did you do at Galton?"

"I jest told yer. 'Ad breakfust."

"Where?"

"At Galton. 'Ow many more times am I to tell yer?"

"In the middle of the road?"

"Corse not!"

"Where—in Galton?"

"Oh, now I see wot yer drivin' at. I 'ad breakfust at a pub. Fisherman's Harms."

"And what made you come on here afterwards?"

"I met a lot o' bobbies in a car, and they made me come on 'ere."

"*Will* you answer my questions properly?" roared the inspector, bursting. "You were coming here when we overtook you, and you said you were after a job."

"That's right. I told yer once. Watcher want me to tell yer agin for?"

Inspector Biggs took out a large pocket-handkerchief and mopped his face.

"I suppose I must take it for granted you're a born fool," he exclaimed. "What made you come *here* after a job? Let's hear that?"

" 'Unger."

"Yes, yes, but what made you think Mr. Elderly would have any work for you?"

"Oh, now I see wot yer mean," replied Geary. "I arst about jobs at the pub, and they told me abart Mr. Elderly, and 'ow 'e 'ad a large 'ouse, and was always takin' on people. So along I comes, and 'ere I am, and that's orl I can tell yer."

Inspector Biggs pondered for a few moments.

"Well, we can corroborate part of your story from the Fisherman's Arms," he said, "but I was round that way myself this morning, and can't say I saw anything of you. What time did you leave?"

" 'Arf-past eight," came the prompt reply.

"How do you know? Got a watch on you?"

"No, but the clock struck 'arf-past as I came out o' the pub."

"Did it? Well, that's interesting! *I* was outside the Fisherman's Arms at half-past eight, and I also heard the clock strike. But *you* didn't come out, my man!"

"Go on! I did!"

"If you did, I was asleep, and the innkeeper will corrobo-

rate your story. Meanwhile, you'll stay here, so that I can keep an eye on you."

There was a pause, and the inspector looked towards the door. Steps were coming along the passage. It occurred to Peter to put a question.

"What about the rest of us?" he enquired. "You won't want to keep an eye on us, too, will you?"

But before the inspector could respond, a constable entered the room and saluted. Biggs interrogated him swiftly.

"Well, Newton?" he cried. "Any luck?"

"None, sir," answered Constable Newton.

"You mean—there's no trace of Mr. Elderly?"

"None, sir. We've rounded everybody up, though, as you instructed."

"'Rounded up,'" murmured Peter. "What nasty expressions you policemen have! We're not sheep."

"Where are they?" demanded Biggs.

"In the kitchen, sir, according as you instructed."

"H'm. Many of them?"

"A tidy crowd."

"And they understand the position?"

"They know they've got to wait, sir, till you give the word. There's two of us down there now, watching them."

"Good. What about the gate?"

"Dawkins is there, sir."

"Good again. I'll be right down. We'll want a couple more men here, I can see. The telephone wire's cut, so I may have to send one of you into Galton for them. This is a bad business—and I'm going to see it through without any bungling."

"I hope you won't bungle, inspector," said the grave voice of the Member of Parliament. "But meanwhile may I repeat my friend's question? Do you intend to keep an eye on *us?*"

The inspector swung round, and faced the speaker.

"Yes—on every one of you," he said, curtly. "I'm not

satisfied, and until I am no one leaves these grounds on any pretext whatever. My men will have strict instructions, and they'll know how to act if my orders are disobeyed! . . . Geary, you come along with us. . . . Right, Newton, carry on."

He turned back to the constable, and a moment later, followed by the constable and the labourer, he left the room.

Five people remained. Sir Julius Hughes, Mrs. Catesby, Miss Ayrton, Peter, and Angela. They endured a somewhat awkward silence, and Peter was about to break it when he stiffened abruptly. A revolver shot rang through the air.

CHAPTER III

"WHO FIRED THAT SHOT?"

STARTLING though it was, the sound of the shot brought with it a queer sense of relief. Here was something tangible at last, something definite to tackle, and without a moment's thought Peter dashed out into the hall; but he had only gone a few paces when he met the inspector racing back to him.

"What's happened?" cried Peter, stopping.

The inspector replied with another question:

"Who fired that shot?"

"How should I know?" retorted Peter, angry at the inspector's hectoring tone. Surely, in the present crisis, they could all pull together!

"It came from the direction of the library," said the inspector, eyeing Peter suspiciously.

"Well, if you mean that one of us fired it, you're wrong," exclaimed Peter. "It seemed to *me* to come from the dining-room."

He ran on again, the inspector at his heels. At the door there was a slight altercation. Peter was about to enter when the inspector pushed him aside.

"I reckon I'll go in first, if you don't mind," snapped Biggs.

"Damn the man!" thought Peter. "Does he think we're all babies?"

He entered a couple of seconds after the inspector, who was already at the French windows across the room. The

windows were open. Regardless of the rain, the inspector disappeared out of them on to the lawn, and then, as Peter was crossing the floor to follow, popped back.

"What are you all up to?" shouted Biggs. "Where are the others?"

"Oh, shut up!" answered Peter, rudely, and tried to reach the window; but the burly inspector caught hold of his shoulder and detained him.

"I'll tell you something, young man," said the inspector, bluntly. "I don't trust you. Have you any weapon on you? Let's feel."

"No, I haven't any weapon on me," exclaimed Peter. "If I had, by Jove, I'd be tempted to use it!"

It was, perhaps, an unwise remark to make in the temper of the moment.

"Really? I'll remember that," said Biggs. "There's a game on, and I expect more than one are in it. Someone got out of that window just as I came in, and they weren't in sight when I got on to the lawn. Gone back into the house by the front door, eh? Someone in skirts. Who were with you when that shot was fired?"

"What do you mean? No one had left the room——"

"Oh, hadn't they?" interposed Biggs, and turned towards the door. Anxious faces were gathering there, but Biggs missed one. "Where's Miss What's-her-name—Mr. Elderly's secretary?"

"I'm here," came a faint voice.

"Ah! Will you step forward a minute?"

Miss Ayrton pushed her way through the little crowd, and stood before the inspector.

"Know anything about that shot?" demanded the inspector.

"No," answered Miss Ayrton. "How should I?"

"Inspector Biggs gives us credit for the most uncanny knowledge," said Peter. "He asked me the same thing."

"Silence!" cried the inspector. "If you think you're helping yourselves by this levity, you're mistaken." He faced Miss Ayrton again. "The shot seems to have been fired from this room. As I entered, a woman was running out through the French windows. When I followed her on to the lawn, she'd disappeared. Now, the only cover she could have reached in that time was the cover of the front door. She could have slipped out of the house through the window, and in again through the door. Possible, isn't it?"

"If you say so," answered the secretary.

"I do say so," retorted Biggs. "And I say that, from the glimpse I had of that young woman, she seemed remarkably like *you!*"

Miss Ayrton stared, dazed, at her accuser, and Angela sprang to her defence.

"That's a perfectly ridiculous idea, inspector!" she cried, indignantly. "Miss Ayrton was with us all the time—wasn't she?" she added, turning to the others for corroboration. "Why, she only left the library a few moments ago, when we did. If you're suggesting——"

"I'm not suggesting anything," interposed the inspector. "I'm simply stating facts."

"Perhaps," proposed Sir Julius Hughes, "instead of stating facts, it might be a good idea to search the lawn?"

"A very good idea," agreed the inspector. "That's why my constables are doing it at this moment. If I hadn't known that, I wouldn't be back here. But, unfortunately, there's more than one place to search, and more than one place to watch."

"Watch us, by all means," nodded the M.P. "I am quite sure, in your eyes, we are a most suspicious lot. But—if you'll forgive me for saying so—you do seem to need a little prompting sometimes. For instance, you say the shot was fired from this room——"

"No, I didn't say it," interrupted Biggs, and pointed to

Peter. "*He* said it. *I* was on my way to the library. However, we'll assume that the shot was fired from here. Well?"

"Well, if it was fired from here, I assume it was fired at something or other?"

"Obviously."

"At—what?"

"That's got to be found out," agreed Inspector Biggs, stroking his moustache. The point was rather perplexing. "No one seems to have been hit by the shot. It might have been fired out of the door at me or one of my men."

"In that case, you'll find the mark of the bullet," said Sir Julius.

"You've no need to tell me that. Can *you* pass a law in a day, sir? Very well, then. I can't catch a criminal in a second. Probably all I shall be able to do is to hold the position till a detective sets to work on the job. But that shot—let's get back to that. It might have been fired through the door, as I say, or out on to the lawn. The woman I saw mightn't have been the one who fired, but the one who was fired at—no, that's not likely. Or—" he paused, and his eyes grew thoughtful. "Perhaps that shot was a decoy—meant to bring us all to this spot while something else more important happened elsewhere." For an instant, a look almost of despair entered the inspector's eyes, and Peter felt a sudden pity for him. Perhaps this *was* rather a tough nut for a country inspector to crack. His brusqueness might be a cloak that covered genuine anxiety and self-doubt, and he was hesitating, plainly undecided as to his next action. A terrific peal of thunder woke him up. Without a word, he made for the French windows and darted out.

Mrs. Catesby smiled sourly.

"He'll get a wetting," she commented. "I can't say I'm sorry."

"I—I think I'm going to faint," murmured Miss Ayrton.

"Come, we don't want any nonsense of that sort!" exclaimed the housekeeper, quickly. "Come along with me, my dear—I'll give you a drop of something that'll do you good. I suppose," she added, as she placed her arm round the secretary and began to draw her from the room. "we're allowed to go to our rooms?"

"Apparently," replied Sir Julius. "I think the ladies had better all retire to their rooms. For my own part, I shall descend to the kitchen, and see how matters are shaping there."

He pushed the door wide, and Mrs. Catesby and the secretary passed out, but when he glanced towards Angela, she shook her head.

"Not just yet," she said. "I'll go up later."

"Take my advice, and don't make it too much later," said Sir Julius, as he departed. "Things are a bit too sultry down here."

A sense of peace descended upon Peter and Angela when they found themselves alone. The peace would be short-lived, but it was good while it lasted, and they turned towards each other instinctively. They had only known each other for three or four months, having met in London through the common interest of their art, but, as Peter himself would have put it, they had made "strides." It was through Angela that he had received his invitation to stay at Mr. Elderly's country house, and he wondered whether Fate had dated his visit to coincide with the period when Angela might have most need of him. His first question, when his eyes met hers, was rather an odd one.

"Does this mean an awful lot to you, Angela?" he asked.

She understood him, and paused before replying.

"It will be terrible if anything has happened to my uncle," she said.

Peter was answered. He knew that Angela did not see her

uncle very often, and that she was only an occasional visitor to Greystones; and he had guessed that, although she always spoke loyally about him, no tremendous love existed between herself and her guardian. At this moment, his knowledge of that fact was an immense relief. The horror of what was happening concerned them, and had to be dealt with, but there would be no unbearable heart-rending.

"Nothing terrible may have happened to him," answered Peter. "In fact, I wouldn't be surprised if the whole thing fizzled out before we knew it, and your uncle popped up with a very simple explanation."

"Trying to be optimistic as usual, Peter?" she enquired, with a little smile.

"Perhaps. I believe in optimism."

"You said it wouldn't rain."

"Well, it's stopping!" They turned towards the window. The heavy shadows were lifting from the lawn. "That's one up to me, Angela. And I dare say the solution of your uncle's disappearance will come just as quickly——"

"Not only of my uncle's disappearance, Peter," she interposed, "but of the cut telephone wires, and of the telegrams he sent, and of the revolver shot—and of that queer workman."

"Yes, that workman rather puzzles me," admitted Peter, frowning. He recalled the terror in Miss Ayrton's eyes when the workman had stepped forward. "He looks harmless enough, but old Biggs caught him out in one lie—and where there's one, there may be a dozen."

He frowned again, while Angela watched him anxiously.

"What are you going to do?" she asked.

"What are *you?*" he retorted. "I think Sir Julius was right—you'd better go to your room."

"I couldn't settle down. I'd rather investigate—if you're going to."

"I'm certainly going to," nodded Peter, "but, for once in my life, I bar your company."

"That means you're going to do something dangerous."

"Of course, I am. I may bump into that blunderbus of an inspector, and incur his ire. He wants the whole show—and *I* want to share a bit of it with him."

He spoke lightly, but Angela was not deceived.

"I know you'll only do what you think ought to be done, Peter," she said, "but please don't get into any serious danger. I mean it. You—*mustn't!*"

"Suppose it were necessary, for your uncle's sake?" he asked.

"Then I suppose you'd have to. But if anything happened to you, I'd feel—awfully alone." She bent forward, and suddenly laid her hand on his sleeve. "Peter—I've not told you—I've not told anyone—but sometimes this place frightens me. I don't know what it is. I've never found out. But—somehow—I'm not half as surprised at all this as I ought to be. Why is it? Do you know?" He shook his head, and reminded her that he had only been at Greystones twenty-four hours. "I dare say I'm silly," she added, "but there it is. If anything happened to you I'd——"

"What?"

"*Scream!* So now you know!" Suddenly she laughed. "Goose, I am! Well, now I'm going to my sitting-room, Peter, and I'll wait there for your report. You'll come and bring it to me, won't you?"

"You bet I will!" exclaimed the young man. "I'll come and see you the moment I've any news."

"That's right. I'll be waiting, remember. And then we'll hold a council of war."

She waved to him, and ran from the room. He looked after her.

"A council of war!" he murmured. "I wonder what put

that into her head? A council of war—against whom?" Then he turned from the door, and looked towards the French windows. A new thought struck him. "I wonder," he reflected, "whether I *really* am going into any danger?"

Danger or not, and Inspector or not, Peter Armstrong decided that, within five minutes, he would be outside the grounds.

But before he embarked on that doubtful journey, he wanted to make a few private investigations of the dining-room.

He walked to the door through which Angela had passed, and closed it. Then he stood with his back to the door, and gazed across the room to the open French windows.

The French windows were immediately ahead of him. To the left was a large, alcoved space, in which stood the dining-table. The dining-table occupied, but did not fill, that side of the spacious room. The other side, to the right, was mainly floor-space, saving for the dark oak sideboard and other furniture against the walls.

"Wonder if anybody's hiding here?" he thought. "After that shot was fired, he might dodge somewhere. I'll have a look."

He was about to move forward when he felt a draught on the back of his neck.

"Now where does *that* come from?" he wondered.

No breeze seemed to have sprung up. He was not standing in a draught, though he had been when the door had been open. The current of air had passed between the open French window and the open door. . . .

"God!" he thought, and wheeled round swiftly.

The door was closed—but someone had opened it for an instant. Softly, and without sound. And had then closed it again!

He seized the door-knob. It would not respond. Someone

was pulling on the other side. Peter now gripped the knob with both hands, and was just preparing for a supreme effort when he heard a faint click. The person outside had turned the key.

Peter swore. He was alone, and he swore unashamedly. Then he ran to the French windows, and stepped out on to the lawn. On the point of summoning the inspector, he changed his mind, and, turning to the right, raced round to the front door. In the porch he collided with the head butler, rushing out.

At last the butler's calm had deserted him. His eyes were staring, and his brow was moist.

"Steady, man!" muttered Peter. "What's happened?"

The butler gasped, and grew limp.

"I don't know, sir," he panted. "Something came upon me in the hall."

"Came upon you? What's that mean, exactly?"

"I couldn't say, sir. It just—came upon me—from behind."

"Then you didn't see it?"

"No, sir. I was thrown forward. And, when I got up, it was gone."

"Yes, yes! But what made you rush out like this?"

The butler looked a little reproachful.

"It's only just happened, sir," he said. "I've hardly collected myself yet, as you might say, you remember that shot, sir—it might have fired at me."

"And so you ran out of the house, before it had a chance," commented Peter. "Well, I won't blame you, but I wish you'd got a sight of the fellow, or creature, or whatever it was. It locked me in the dining-room just before it butted into you. S'pose it's too late now to chase it."

"We'd better tell the inspector," suggested the butler.

"No, not yet," decided Peter. "Come round with me to the dining-room again. We'll unlock the door and have an-

other look round. You know," he added, thoughtfully, "if whoever it was is the fellow who fired that shot, it lets off Miss Ayrton, doesn't it?"

The butler blinked uncomprehendingly. Peter continued. "That inspector fool was trying to make out that Miss Ayrton had fired at him from the French windows, wasn't he, and had then run out on to the lawn, and back into the house to quell suspicion."

"She'd have had to be pretty nippy," commented the butler.

"Extremely nippy," agreed Peter. "But it could be done. Only—" He paused suddenly. "Only in that case—she'd have been a bit wet. It hadn't quite stopped raining then." He gave an exclamation. "Yes, by Jove—of course, she'd have been wet! Now—I wonder if her shoulders are damp at this moment. Somehow, I don't believe they are." They reached the dining-room door. The key was on the outside, and Peter turned it. "Mrs. What's-her-name—the housekeeper—took charge of her. I think I'll ask her presently."

He threw the door open. He half-expected to see some change in it, but there was none. They stared around, frowning and mystified.

"Look here, let's go over the ground," said Peter. "I really think I can be almost as good at this game as the inspector. Here's what happened, isn't it? The inspector is coming along the hall—just as we have. Right. If someone wanted to get a pot shot at him—thinking he was going to enter the dining-room, they might stand at the French windows, say, all nice and ready with their little pistol. Old Biggs swears he saw a skirt. Very well. Agreed. The lady waits. Now, I'll go across and be the lady, and you stay by the door and be the inspector, just arriving."

"Eh? I beg your pardon, sir?" jerked the head butler.

"You know, you're not listening," said Peter, reproachfully.

"Yes, I am, sir," returned the butler. "But somebody's just rung for me from the library."

"Oh, well, get along," grunted Peter. "I don't need you, really. I can do this reconstruction by myself."

"Thank you, sir," murmured the butler, and departed rather hurriedly.

"The library—wonder who's rung for him," mused Peter, as he crossed the carpet. "Now, then, here we are. I'm a lady with a pistol." He turned. "I hear the mortal enemy approach. I raise my hand thus. But I am flurried, and I fire wide. I cannot hit the space in the doorway. What *do* I hit —*ah!*"

He gave a little cry of triumph. His sharp eye had spotted something. Racing back to the door, he shoved a chair against it, jumped up, and examined the picture-rail. With the aid of a pocket-knife, he extracted a bullet.

"I don't know much about bores and bullets," he said to himself, "but I'll bet that came out of a Colt."

He slipped the bullet into his pocket. By all the rules, he should have taken it to the inspector. But, somehow, he did not feel at all inclined to obey the rules. He wanted to go his own way for awhile, and to establish his own lines of communication.

"I think I've got quite enough evidence to justify my poking around where I jolly well like," he reflected, "and, by Jove, I'm determined to do it. The inspector's a fool and a bungler, and I'll be outside his blessed police cordon inside sixty seconds—see if I'm not!"

Suddenly a new thought came to him out of the blue.

"Funny thing," he pondered, "I never heard that library bell ring."

CHAPTER IV

NUMBER TWO

PETER ARMSTRONG was a determined young man, and people sometimes mistook the smiling quality of his eyes through forgetting to look at his chin. But, for the second time that memorable morning, Peter discovered that even determination cannot achieve everything.

He had determined, for instance, to take Angela Vernon out for a walk; the clouds had drenched his determination, and so had four wretched policemen and an inspector. Now he determined to take another walk, this time alone, but circumstances again intervened and proved too strong for him.

The gate by the lodge could be reached in sixty seconds on a normal occasion, and when Peter stepped out on to the lawn that now glowed moistly in the returned sunlight, the coast looked clear enough. Some distance to the right, on the side farthest from the lodge gate, two policemen were searching bushes. Inspector Biggs was with them, and their three backs looked grim among the roses. But their backs were infinitely preferable to their fronts just then, and, congratulating himself on his good luck, Peter slipped quickly round to the left and made for the curving driveway.

"Old fossil, that inspector chap!" he grunted. "I'll beat him at his own game!"

Half-way down the drive, he paused. The trees bordering the drive were thick, and the way from the road to the house was through a small, cultivated forest. John Elderly had always prided himself on this approach which, in addition to its

great beauty, was teasingly mysterious. Only that morning, over breakfast, Elderly had said, with grim jocularity, "One could commit a murder there, and you young folks playing tennis a minute away could go on smashing balls across the net all unconscious! Sunlight and shadow, eh? Twin sisters!" And then he had chuckled.

Peter recalled the remark and the chuckle as he paused, but whether the sudden recollection—or something else—had made him pause, he could not say. He gazed towards a little opening on his left, a few yards ahead of him, and all at once, as the top of a bush trembled, he made an impulsive dash for it.

"Damn!" he exclaimed, the next moment.

The clearing was empty, yet he was sure now that somebody had been there. Watching him? He frowned. He ought to have been a second sooner.

Of course, he could continue the chase through the trees. Yes, perhaps he ought to do that. Yet the idea was oddly distasteful to him. He felt no fear, but he had an instinctive distrust of anything that intruded on his purpose. This might be a decoy—some device to prevent him from reaching the lodge gate. Wouldn't he be a simpleton to be diverted so easily?

And then there was another consideration that held the young man back. "If anything should happen to you, I'd scream," Angela had said. Not only the words, but something behind the words, had impressed him. Angela needed him, and, that being so, Peter Armstrong decided that he was going to take no unnecessary risks.

So he turned back towards the gravel drive—and then again halted.

He was nearer the gate than he had imagined, and voices reached him. They came from across the drive, where the lodge stood; but Peter could only see the roof of the lodge

from where he was, and he could not see the speakers. He guessed that one of them was a constable, however. Probably Constable Dawkins, who had been stationed by the gate.

"No, you don't!" said the voice of the constable.

"Let go!" exclaimed another voice, vaguely familiar.

"Ay, and what'll you do if I do let go?" demanded the constable.

"That's my business!"

"Well, it's mine, too!"

"No, it ain't." The tone was indignant, but cowed. "You can't do nothin' to me, if I chooses to go?"

"That's just where you're wrong, young feller, my lad! I can do a lot to you—and a lot more than you'll care for."

"Wot can you do?"

"You'll see, if you don't stop playing the fool——"

"Playing the fool, eh? That's good, that is! I ain't done nothin', I tell yer, so wot are you standin' there for—if I want to go fer a walk?"

"I'll tell you what I'm standing 'ere for, young feller, my lad," replied the constable, after a moment's reflection. "I'm standing 'ere for your good. I'm standing 'ere because nobody's got to leave this place, not till things is straightened out, see? That's the inspector's instructions——"

"Inspector! 'E's a mug, if ever there was one——"

"—and them's the instructions I'm going to carry out. Any more monkey-tricks, and I'll march you up to the 'ouse! Got that, sonny?"

There was a pause. Then the beaten one muttered. "Oh, all right. Let go."

"That's the idea," said the constable.

Then, after another pause, there was a sound of a blow, and something fell to the ground.

Peter waited no longer. He dashed out into the driveway, saw the recumbent figure of the constable, and the flashing

figure of the man who had knocked him down. It was the gardener who had been standing by the lodge when the police had arrived—the ill-visaged, sandy-haired man with the scar.

Issues became confused. The gardener was climbing the gate, which was also Peter's objective. There was now no obstacle, saving the gate itself, since officialdom lay stretched out on the ground. But Peter found himself very reluctant to permit the gardener to enjoy the freedom of action he wished to secure for himself, and although the gardener was already half over the gate—the constable's form obstructed its free opening—Peter raced towards him.

It was a one-sided race. The gardener had too much start. All the same, the fellow did not get over the gate. A new figure suddenly slipped forward from the shadows, stretched out a hand, caught the gardener's shoulder, and twisted him back off his perch.

"Got you!" said the newcomer.

Peter recognised the workman.

The gardener lay, depressed and panting, on the ground from which the constable now slowly rose. The constable looked almost as depressed as the gardener, but matters were improving with him, whereas they were getting worse for the gardener, so he could pant a little more hopefully.

"There'll be trouble over this," he muttered, thickly. "See if there isn't!" Then he stared at the two fresh figures that had materialized on his horizon since his tumble. " 'Ow did *you* get 'ere?" he demanded.

He was trying hard to be dignified, but it was difficult. A beautiful black eye was developing.

"I s'pose 'e done it," replied the workman, stolidly.

"What's that?" exclaimed the policeman.

"I ses, I s'pose 'e done it," repeated the workman.

"Done what?" snapped the constable.

"Go on—yer knows as well as I does," retorted the work-

man. "Feller up at the 'ouse 'as been murdered, ain't 'e?"

The constable rubbed his nose, and glared at the workman.

"Seems to me you're the kind that *talks* too much," he growled. "Leave off guessing! You 'aven't answered my question yet. 'Ow did *you* get 'ere?"

"Couple o' feet," suggested the workman, unsmilingly.

"Which you aren't s'posed to use," the constable barked back. "'Oo's give you permission to walk about?"

"Nobody."

"Ah. Then what are you walkin' about for?"

Then the stolid workman did smile faintly.

"Same as 'im," he replied, jerking his head towards the gardener, who had made no attempt to rise. Three people stood over the gardener. What was the use?

"Meanin', as, fer instance—?" queried the constable.

"Meaning as me, for instance," interposed Peter, thinking it about time he got in a word. "I'm also walking about, constable, so you see we're all in good company. At least," he added, "I'm not really sure it's good company."

"Ah, there you are," said the constable, shrewdly. "It's like this. You all want to take a walk, and you all want to leave—*I* know—but you don't want nobody else to do it. And that's where *we* come in. *Nobody's* going to do it, not till the inspector gives the word."

"Yes, but listen to me for a minute," answered Peter. "I'm quite sure your inspector is a fine fellow, but he hasn't got the right to treat all of us as prisoners."

"That's wot I ses," nodded the workman. "So I was jest goin'."

"My dear fellow, you misunderstand me entirely," observed Peter, turning to him. "I said 'all of us.' I thoroughly agree with the inspector for keeping a restraining hand on *you,* and upon ugly gardeners." Then he turned back to the

constable. "You see, don't you, that I'm really on the side of the police. My sole objection is that the police won't let me help them—won't let *anybody* help them, in fact, who might be able to. No, don't interrupt for a minute," he ran on. "There's a good fellow. What you don't seem to realise yet is this—the disappearance of Mr. Elderly—my host—is either very urgent, or a wash-out. In the latter case, the attitude you are taking up will make you a laughing-stock. Back walks John Elderly, cool as a cucumber. No promotion for Inspector Biggs if that happens, I think!"

"But 'e mayn't walk back," interposed Dawkins.

"No—somehow I don't think he will walk back," said Peter, slowly. "And, in that case, it should be a call for all hands on deck—or most of 'em. Official discrimination could perhaps keep a few below."

"Beggin' your pardon, sir," frowned Dawkins, "but it seems to me you talk more than the rest of 'em put together——"

"I do love talking," admitted the young man.

"Well, this ain't the time," exclaimed Dawkins, "and it ain't no good talkin' to *me*."

"Very good," nodded Peter. "Then I'll say good-day."

He turned towards the gate, and Dawkins sprang forward with a shout.

"You don't go out, and don't you think it!" he cried.

"Shall we knock him down again, Mr. Workman?" queried Peter, regarding the restraining hand on his arm. "He's got one eye left unblacked."

"That'd be—we'd *both* on us leave?" asked the workman.

Peter hesitated, and Dawkins' face blazed. It was two to one against the constable, and a third was recovering on the gravel. He glanced quickly in the direction of the house, and then turned quickly back again.

"What do you *want* to go out there for?" he demanded, angrily.

"It ought to be obvious," said Peter, pleasantly. "I want to get some more police along—to reinforce your obviously inadequate numbers."

"Is that all?" enquired Dawkins, and suddenly smiled. "Well, in that case, sir, there ain't *no* need for you to trouble."

Constable Dawkins was now looking out into the road. Peter followed his gaze. Four more policemen were approaching.

"*Now* where do I stand?" thought Peter, perplexed. "Dashed if I can get this straight!"

He ought to have rejoiced in the sight of the very reinforcements he had declared to be necessary. Inconsistently, however, the sight depressed him. These approaching uniforms only made a stronger ring round the house—a ring composed now of eight constables and one inspector—and escape would be harder than ever.

Escape? What was he trying to escape from? No, that was not the word. Well—wasn't it?

"Hang it!" he muttered to himself. "I don't know."

A strong desire to return to the house, to see Angela, and to consult her over these new turns, swept through him. Clearly, at the moment, there was no passage for him through the gate, and he would serve no useful purpose by further fencing with the police. Yes, he had better go back. Perhaps something was happening there in connection with which he could be of greater assistance.

"Right!" he exclaimed, abruptly. "Then that's that!"

He turned, and strode back along the driveway, conscious that Dawkins was watching him curiously; but he paid no further heed to the dutiful constable. When he reached the

house, he found Inspector Biggs standing in the porch, staring out at him.

"Where've you been?" demanded the inspector, suspiciously.

"Trying to get out at the gate," replied Peter, with disarming frankness. "But your conscientious bobby wouldn't let me."

"Of course he wouldn't," said the inspector. "What did you want to get out for?"

Peter shrugged his shoulders.

"I understand the telephone wires are cut," he answered, "and I thought I might go for reinforcements. You seem to have got your hands pretty full with only five on the job."

He could not keep a slight note of sarcasm out of his voice. Biggs flushed.

"Our hands are full because of such interference as yours," he exclaimed, beetling his eyebrows. "When I want reinforcements, I'll send for them myself."

"*Haven't* you sent for them?" asked Peter, innocently.

Biggs seemed about to reply, but changed his mind. He studied Peter for a few seconds, then shot out, suddenly, "Where's Davis?"

"Is it a riddle?" asked Peter.

"The whole thing's a riddle!" rasped the inspector. "Do you know where Davis is?"

"I don't even know *who* Davis is," replied Peter. "There was a Davis at Harrow——"

"Davis is the head butler," interrupted Biggs. "You saw him with your own eyes a few minutes ago. . . . He's disappeared."

Peter whistled softly. The inspector emitted a short, savage laugh.

"Ah, now p'r'aps you're getting to understand me a bit

better," he snapped. "Now p'r'aps you know why I'm keeping you all here. Davis went into the library four minutes ago. To answer a bell. He never came out of the library. And the library's empty."

CHAPTER V

A CONFERENCE

FAMILIARITY does not always breed contempt. Sometimes it produces an exalted sense of comfort. The person you know well, and who knows you well, is a soft pillow after a day spent among strangers, while a room filled with personal knick-knacks welcomes one happily from a maze of confusion outside. Angela's sitting-room, when she returned to it after her conversation with Peter, certainly welcomed her, and she sank into her settee with a little sigh of gratitude.

The room would have been charming even to a stranger, for John Elderly had allowed his niece both a free hand and a free purse when originally fixing up the suite that was to be hers. Its dominant colours were blue and gold, and its dominant note was comfort. But to Angela herself, on this bewildering morning, it was a haven of ease and delight, and she only longed for one thing to complete the consolation it afforded—the presence of the pleasant, freckled young man who at that moment was going through queer experiences in the dining-room below.

Alone, gazing into the fern-filled grate, she tried to sort out her feelings. They were in a state of tragic confusion. Alarm for her uncle was mixed with self-repugnance because that alarm was so oddly impersonal; and mingling again with her self-reproach was a large measure of self-indignation that had nothing whatever to do with her callous sensations towards her uncle. She was afraid, and that made her very angry. She hated fear, and despised cowards.

But Angela had to admit to herself that she had some justification for her tremors. Her uncle had telephoned for the police less than an hour ago, and had been spirited away during the operation. A shot had been fired. Five police officials were in command. And the telephone wires had been cut. These were really enough to upset anybody's equilibrium.

She rose from the settee with an impatient exclamation, and moved to the window. Propped up on a table was a small easel, bearing a half-completed canvas. Yesterday she had begun a picture of the view from her window. She took up her brushes, and worked listlessly.

It had been sunny on the previous afternoon when she had started the painting, and she had designed blue sky. Now, acting on impulse, she blotched in great clouds and shadows. "Foolish!" she laughed at herself. But she went on. For that was how Greystones appeared to her that morning—a wonderful spot, smiling under an over-hanging terror.

"By Jove—you've *got* it!" said a voice.

She started, and turned her head. Peter was standing by the door.

"I did knock—honestly I did," he apologised, "but Art evidently engrossed you. May I come in?"

"You may always come in," she replied, impulsively, and he warmed at the words.

"I'll keep you to that, Angela!" he exclaimed. "Thanks awfully for the permanent invitation. But, I say, that picture really *is* good! Bit grim, though, eh?"

"I meant it to be," answered Angela, laying down her brushes. "Look out of the window yourself—do you see the view differently?"

"The sun's shining now," he protested.

"Evasion of the issue, my friend!"

"Quite right—I *did* evade the issue," he laughed. "Grey-

stones *is* grim to-day. But—Angela—this little corner of it isn't."

She laughed, too, and flushed a little.

"Yes, it's a pretty room," she observed, lightly.

"How's *that* for evasion of the issue?" he challenged. "You know I wasn't thinking of the room——"

"Peter, we must be serious," she interrupted. "Come and sit down. I can see you've got some news, and I want to hear it." She sank down on the settee and pushed a little silver box towards him. "And you may smoke."

Peter opened the box and took out a cigarette. He lit it thoughtfully, his gay manner leaving him as he sat down beside Angela. His mind was in a queer tangle. Blinding joy was in that pleasant room—within a few inches of him. And ghosts walked outside.

"Yes, Angela, I have got some news," he said, after a pause. "Rum news. But, first, I want to say something." She looked at him a little anxiously, and he smiled. "No, it's not quite as bad as you imagine. The full shock may come later. All I want to say at this moment is that this room is a wonderful sanctuary—absolutely different, you know, from all that's outside. One can *think* here!"

"I'm glad you feel that way," she answered. "We'll think together."

"Yes, that's the idea. And I expect we've got to do a lot of thinking together." Then he asked, abruptly, "Have you heard about Davis?"

"No," replied Angela, apprehensively. "What's happened to him?"

"Don't know. Nobody seems to know. He's disappeared." He heard her gasp, and patted her arm. "Maybe he'll turn up again."

But his voice was not reassuring.

"How did it happen, Peter—and when?" she asked. "He

was downstairs with us while the inspector was asking all those questions."

Peter nodded.

"Yes, I know he was," he said. "I saw him after you did, Angela. While I was poking around, just before I made my unsuccessful attempt to reach the road——"

"They stopped you?" she interrupted, quickly.

"They did—but I'll tell you *that* yarn in a minute. While I was poking around, I bumped into your head butler, and he was trembling like a jelly. Then he went off to answer a bell in the library——"

"Yes, but why was he trembling?" demanded Angela. "Just fright?"

Peter smiled.

"You're a perfectly rotten person to tell a story to," he reproved. "What shall we do about it?"

"There's only one thing to do about it," she returned. "I keep on interrupting because I feel you'll keep things back if I don't, and I want to hear everything—*everything!* If you'll promise not to hide anything from me, Peter, *I'll* promise not to go on interrupting. Is it a bargain?"

Peter hesitated. He had wondered how far it would be wise to confide in Angela. He did not want to frighten her with unnecessary details, yet he hated the idea of any secrecy between them. Wisely or unwisely, he decided to comply with her request.

"Very well, it's a bargain," he said. "I'll tell you what scared old Davis—or, at least, as much as I know myself. Apparently someone—someone sprang upon him from behind. Don't ask me how, or why. I couldn't tell you! Davis came barging out of the porch just as I was barging in. We didn't find out who it was."

He paused. Angela's lips were set. He went on:

"No, we didn't find the blighter, but I think it was a fellow

who had tried to lock me in the dining-room. I had been poking around there, as I said. This chap opened the dining-room door while my back was turned. I didn't hear him do it, but I felt the sudden draught. Then, when I turned round, he'd closed the door again, and locked it. I was running round to catch him when I went smack into Davis."

"How horrible!" shuddered Angela.

"Yes—pretty mouldy," agreed Peter. "I'm not sure that I ought to tell you all these grim details——"

"What one doesn't know is worse than what one does know, Peter," she interposed. "You can't guess what a relief it will be to my mind to feel that things aren't happening behind my back!"

"I understand," he responded, gravely. "They won't happen behind your back,—as far as I'm concerned. I've not kept this mysterious door-locker back, and I'm not keeping the disappearance of Davis back. Someone rang for him in the library—he went in—and he never came out again."

There was a short silence. Then Angela asked,

"Who saw him go in?"

"The inspector, I believe. Anyway, I know he went in, because he was with me when the bell rang."

"I don't understand, Peter," said Angela, puckering her brows. "You say he went in, and didn't come out again. Does that mean that—when the inspector went in himself—the room was empty?"

"Yes, that's it."

"And there was no trace at all of Davis?"

"Apparently, none."

"Peter," she said, after a little pause, "I—I wonder who rang that bell?"

"So do I!" growled the young man. "I've wondered ever since."

"Have you got a theory?"

"Only one."

"Let's hear it. I've got one, too."

"P'r'aps they're the same, Angela. I thought it might be the mysterious person who locked me into the dining-room."

"Yes, that's what I thought," she nodded. "And the person who fired the shot. I suppose you've realised, Peter," she added, slowly, "that Davis makes the second person who has disappeared from this house to-day?"

"Of course, I've realised it," answered Peter. "We—we don't want any more, do we?"

Then he told her the story of his own experiences at the lodge gate. She listened eagerly, and gave a little exclamation when he concluded with the news that fresh police had just arrived.

"Peter," she cried, "aren't we worrying ourselves more than we need? The police are bound to clear all this up!"

"Do you think so?" he responded, doubtfully.

"Don't you?"

"The police aren't supposed to clear anything up!"

"That's in books and in plays. But I've a higher opinion of the police."

"Well, to be frank, old thing, so have I," admitted Peter. "But I haven't a high opinion of the police *here*."

"Why not?" she challenged.

"I hardly know. It's odd. But they don't seem to me to be going the right way about it. I'll not be happy until the inspector has handed the reins over to that detective he spoke of—if he ever does. I tell you, Angela, that inspector's a fool!"

Angela smiled. She could not quite understand her companion's vehemence.

"What's he done to make you hate him so?" she enquired. "Aren't you a little prejudiced, perhaps, because he chooses to suspect you—and me—along with the rest?"

"I'm not sure that I'd mind that so much," Peter grumbled, "if only he'd suspect people intelligently. Take that secretary, for instance—Miss Ayrton. He practically accused her of having fired that shot, didn't he? But if she'd run out on to the lawn, as he suggested, and then returned to the house by the front door, she'd have been *wet!* It was pouring. Well, he never went into that question. If she wasn't wet, she couldn't have been out on the lawn. Now the question is—*was* she wet?"

"Yes, that *is* a point, Peter," admitted Angela, impressed. "I like Gertrude. She's a dear. And I'd like to clear her. Shall I go and talk to her? What do you think?"

"She'd be dry by now," objected Peter.

"Mrs. Catesby would know," Angela pointed out. "She took her to her room, you remember. Yes, Peter, I think I'll go."

She rose from the settee, and the young man rose, also. The suggestion was sound, but somehow he hated it. In this house, where people disappeared, he hated to let Angela out of his sight.

"Make sure you come back," he said, lugubriously.

"Of course, I'll come back, she resisted. "Gertrude's room is only a little way up the passage, and I don't suppose anything will spring at *me*. If it does, I'll scream, and you can rush to my assistance. I've got quite a good scream."

Telling him to wait till she returned, Angela left the room, but Peter followed her to the door, and watched her till she turned round the bend in the passage beyond which was Gertrude Ayrton's room. Then he returned to the settee, and waited.

He did not waste his time. On a sheet of paper he wrote a list of queries, and as these queries became increasingly important, and received later on many additions, we may pause ourselves to glance at them.

He wrote them, numbering each one, as they occurred to him:—

"1. What has happened to John Elderly?
"2. What has happened to Davis, the head butler?
"3. Who rang the library bell that Davis answered?
"4. Who attacked Davis, before he answered the bell?
"5. Who locked me in the dining-room?
"6. Who fired the shot?
"7. Why is the inspector such an idiot?
"8. Why did the inspector suspect Miss Ayrton?
"9. And why was Miss Ayrton upset when she saw Geary?
"10. Why did Geary tell a lie?
"11. *Did* Geary tell a lie?
"12. Why have the telephone wires been cut?
"13. Who has cut 'em?
"14. Why are we all treated like prisoners?
"15. How did the second lot of police get here so soon?
"16. Did Inspector Biggs send for them, and how?
"17. Who watched me from the bushes near the gate?
"18. Why did the gardener and Geary want to get away?
"19. Why did Geary prevent the gardener from getting away?
"20. For that matter, why did I want to get away?
"21. Why the blazes didn't the bobby at the gate blow his police-whistle when trouble was brewing?"

His mind began to spin, and he laid his pencil down as the door opened behind him. He turned quickly, and saw, to his relief, that it was Angela. But Angela's eyes were troubled.

"What's the matter?" he asked.

"I can't make it out," returned Angela. "Gertrude is still in the housekeeper's room, and Mrs. Catesby refuses to let me see her!"

"Well, I'm blowed!" exclaimed Peter, and added to his list:—

"22. Why won't Mrs. Catesby let Angela see Miss Ayrton?"

CHAPTER VI

ON THE LANDING

"LET us settle a legal point," said Peter. "In the absence of your uncle, who is boss of this house?"

"I don't know," replied Angela. "Mrs. Catesby seems to think she is."

"Well, I seem to think *you* are," responded Peter, decisively, "and I further seem to think you're *going* to be! What argument did Mrs. Catesby use? You know, Angela, I never did like that lady."

"She used rather a convincing argument," answered Angela, pouting. "Physical force."

"Good Lord, this is getting beyond the limit!" exclaimed the young man, angrily. "You don't mean she laid her hands on you?"

"No, Peter. We didn't get quite as far as that. But when I found Gertrude wasn't in her own room—I went there first, because I thought she might have returned there, you see—I tried the housekeeper's room, and wasn't allowed to enter."

"What does 'not allowed' mean?"

"She came out, and barred my way."

"She admitted that Miss Ayrton was with her, though?" asked Peter.

"Oh, yes. That was her point. 'She's in a very bad state, almost in hysterics,' she told me, 'and she can't see anybody.' I tried to get by her, but she barred the way."

"By Jove, I'm quite looking forward to a little interview with Mrs. Catesby!" declared Peter, venomously. "She won't be able to bar *my* way——"

"It won't be quite as easy as you think, my dear," interposed Angela, with a wry smile. "Even with the best of intentions, you can't exactly force your way into a lady's bedroom!"

"P'r'aps not," retorted Peter, "but I can gently and firmly restrain Mrs. Catesby, when we confront her, from preventing *you* from going in. Come along. This inactivity is getting on my nerves!"

They left the room together, and walked along the rich, soft carpet that turned the first floor landing into a thing of beauty. They rounded the angle, went by the empty bedroom of the secretary, and reached the west wing of the house. Angela's suite was in the east wing. When they got to the housekeeper's door, Peter commanded the girl to knock.

She did so. There was no reply.

"Once more," whispered Peter. "Then open it."

Angela obeyed. Still no response. Then she turned the handle. The door was locked.

"Oh, so it's like that, is it?" commented Peter. "Open warfare—or, rather, closed warfare! Very well. Let's try this!"

He banged upon the door lustily, but even this drastic measure failed to produce the slightest result.

"Is Mrs. Catesby defiant, or dead? he asked. "The latter, I hope, with all the lack of charity in me!"

"She may not be in her room," suggested Angela.

"She may not," agreed Peter. "In that case, she appears to have locked Miss Ayrton in."

"But Miss Ayrton may not be in, either," Angela went on.

"In that case, Miss Ayrton cannot be so seriously ill. However we look at it, Angela, it's unsatisfactory. I've half a mind to smash the door in!"

"You'd probably have to smash two doors," said Angela,

hopelessly. "This door leads to the sitting-room, and the bedroom's beyond. It's a suite, something like mine."

"Well, I've got two fists," answered Peter. "And they're simply bursting to hit something!"

"I think you'd better try and restrain their impatience a little longer," observed a quiet voice behind them.

They turned. The softness of the carpet had its disadvantages. But, to their relief, they found that the speaker was Sir Julius Hughes.

"Friend or foe?" challenged Peter, with a twinkle.

"Friend," replied Sir Julius, smiling, "with a couple of useful fists of my own, which can be used, if necessary. Sometimes we fight in Parliament, you know."

"Then help me with this door," answered Peter. "I want to smash it in."

"If I may venture to say so, that would be perfectly idiotic," said Sir Julius. His rich, deep voice was curiously soothing. It struck a note of assurance and sanity in the midst of bedlam. "Above all things, we must not lose our self-control. I have just lost mine, and I have reproved myself. It shall not occur again."

"I'll bet it was that old fossil of an inspector who made you lose it," exclaimed Peter.

"The answer is in the affirmative," smiled Sir Julius. "We have had a first-class row."

"Good! What about?"

Sir Julius shrugged his shoulders.

"Why do you want to smash that door down?" he asked, in his turn.

"Parliamentary prevarication, Sir Julius," interposed Angelia, with a little laugh. "We asked our question first."

"Very well—I'll tell you," said Sir Julius, gravely, and he looked round the hallway as though to make sure they were alone. "I don't like Biggs's methods, and I told him so. He

doesn't know the first rudiments of cross-examination—I found that out listening to his cross-examination of the staff down below—and he is equally ignorant as to procedure. I told him that I wished to get into communication with certain official quarters, and he flatly refused to allow me to do so. He argued that two people could not handle a case, and he got quite cross when I pointed out that, sometimes, even one man could not handle it. In the end, I told him that I refused to admit his authority over me, that Mr. Elderly was a friend of mine—" the past tense slipped out unconsciously, but only the girl noticed it "—and that I was going out to find the nearest telephone at once. What do you suppose he did?"

"Whatever he did, I'd expect it of him," grunted Peter.

"He summoned two of his policemen, and threatened to put me in handcuffs if I disobeyed him."

"Then was the time to hit his face," remarked Peter.

"Peter, don't be blood-thirsty," reproved Angela, though she could not help smiling. She felt that this pugnacious attitude, when wisely applied, might prove very useful in the near future, and she rejoiced in her knowledge of Peter's physical strength.

"Wisely spoken, Miss Vernon," nodded the Member of Parliament. "Very wisely spoken. It is many years since my school-days, but, I assure you both, I quite longed to hit the inspector's face. But I should have been forced to hit two more faces, as well, and, in the process, my own might have been hit. So, in true parliamentary style, I preserved my face—and that," he added, seriously, "is what we have all of us got to do. If we don't like officialdom, we have got to pretend to like it—for a few hours, at any rate."

He made the statement, but his eyes were questioning as they rested upon the two young people before him. He was tacitly asking whether they agreed with him.

"I suppose you're right, sir," muttered Peter. "But I jolly well hope those few hours will pass quickly."

"I'm *sure* you're right, Sir Julius," said Angela. "We place ourselves unreservedly under your command."

She glanced at Peter as she spoke, and she noted the sudden little gleam in his eye. She knew that he was telling himself he would place himself under nobody's command but his own.

"And *now,*" proceeded Sir Julius, "may I know why you had designs on that harmless-looking door?"

They told him. His expression grew more serious. He admitted that their motive was good, at any rate.

"It looks as though they're keeping Miss Ayrton even more closely guarded than the rest of us," said Peter. "In fact, there's been a sort of dead set against her from the start. You remember the inspector suggested she had fired the shot? And that she had run out on to the lawn afterwards? Well, in that case she'd have been wet, wouldn't she, and I wanted to find out whether she *was* wet."

"She wasn't," answered Sir Julius. "I was next to her, and will vouch that she was as dry as any of us."

Peter whistled softly.

"Then all I can say," he declared, with warmth, "is that the inspector is the biggest ass who ever wore official uniform——"

"Rather a large order," murmured the M. P.

"—or that he's got his knife into Miss Ayrton for some special reason of his own. He'll say she spirited away the butler next——"

"What's that?" interrupted Sir Julius, sharply.

"Eh? Don't you know?" exclaimed Peter, in surprise. "Davis has been spirited away, just as Mr. Elderly was. He went into the library to answer the bell—and that was the end of him! Unpleasant room, that library, I'm begin-

ning to think. A sort of vanishing apartment. In you go, and you're lucky if you come out again. Yes, you may stare, Sir Julius, but I'm not inventing. You don't have to invent in this house."

Sir Julius was certainly staring. His mouth opened a little, then suddenly snapped close. For an instant, parliamentary blandness slipped from him, and anger shone in his eyes.

"And here we are, herded together like helpless sheep!" he exclaimed. "When we're through with this, that inspector will go through a bad time, I promise! Well, if we can't do anything outside, we can at least get busy inside—and the first thing to do, it seems to me, is to investigate that library."

"I'm all for it!" answered Peter. "Let's go now. And you trot back to your room, Angela, and lock yourself in till we report to you," he added, turning to the girl.

"Do you think I'm that sort?" she demanded indignantly.

"I'm sure you're not that sort," replied Peter. "But there's no need for you to run into danger unnecessarily, is there?"

"If you go, I go," she said, quietly.

Peter appealed to Sir Julius, and a warm debate was about to develop when Sir Julius abruptly held up his hand. They stopped talking, and listened. Soft footsteps came to them from the far end of the passage.

"Someone's coming up the back staircase," whispered Angela.

"And trying to be precious quiet about it," Peter whispered back. "Here's a handy curtain—what about it?"

They slipped behind the curtain, without shame or dignity, and Peter became conscious of the thudding of someone's heart. To his annoyance, he discovered that it was his own. But he had a double excuse, he told himself. Angela was

very close to him, and her hand had instinctively sought his.

Yes, Angela and Peter had some consolation for their uncomfortable position. Perhaps the M.P. was the only one who really deserved pity. He wondered to himself what his electors would have thought if they could have pictured him at that moment.

The footsteps drew nearer. Soon they stopped. A long and painful silence ensued. Was the newcomer standing still, near them, Peter wondered, or had he passed on? Was it someone familiar, or a stranger? Was it, perhaps, the mysterious person who had fired the shot, or jumped upon Davis, or rung the library bell? The same thought passed through Angela's mind, and her fingers tightened upon his.

Seconds ticked by that seemed like minutes. At last Peter could stand it no longer, and, risking all, peeped round the curtain. What he saw was totally unexpected.

Had it been a giant or a dragon, it would have been an appropriate culmination of their suspense. But it proved to be a stunted little girl, lean, uncouth, and immensely grubby. Only the back of her was visible to Peter. A bent back view. She was standing outside the housekeeper's door, trying to look through the key-hole.

Reaction set in. Peter wanted to laugh. But, a second later, he was glad he had controlled himself. A hoarse voice came along the passage.

"Cheese it!" whispered the hoarse voice.

"Oh, my 'eart!" gasped the grubby girl.

"Come aht of it, Lizzie," whispered the hoarse voice.

"But *she's* in 'ere!" breathed the girl.

"Well, *you* carn't do nuffiin'!"

"Wot are they doin' to 'er?"

"Nuffin' ter wot they'll do ter *you,* if they catches yer! Twist yer neck, like as not."

"Go on!"

"Quinn would!"

"'E'd 'ave ter be nippy. I got a knife!"

"'E *is* nippy. And 'e's got a knife, too—yus, *and* a shooter! Cricky—I b'leeve I 'ear 'im comin'. Quit foolin', Liz! 'Op it! *Quick!*"

There was a scurry of feet. In a flash, they were gone. Somebody else was approaching, slowly and stealthily, from the other end of the passage.

Peter hesitated. To have revealed themselves earlier would have been to conclude an informative conversation, and that had also been the thought of Angela and Sir Julius. To reveal themselves now would be equally fruitless. Better to acquire knowledge, when the chance offered, and to discuss how to profit by it later. A glimpse of Quinn should prove illuminating.

So the watchers remained motionless and concealed, and not till the footsteps had approached them, paused at the housekeeper's door, and passed on did they peep again from the curtain.

Walking slowly away in the direction of the back stairs was George Geary, the workman.

They gazed after him till he disappeared. A few seconds later, the library bell rang.

CHAPTER VII

THE LOCKED DOOR

THERE is, perhaps, no sound that can be more eerie than a bell. A knock can be unpleasant, but a knock has no voice; a bell, on the other hand, has many voices, human or inhuman, as it suddenly jangles into stillness, or reverberates unexpectedly in one's ears, or echoes faintly in the distance. Moreover, whereas a knock waits upon your invitation, a bell is a summons.

Peter admitted to himself that the sound of the library bell was the nastiest sound he had heard so far in this strange house, and for a second his mind refused to function. The second passed, however, to be succeeded by a burning desire for action.

"Look here!" he whispered, tensely. "We can't leave things like this! I'm going down."

"I'm going with you," said Sir Julius.

"So am I," added Angela.

Peter turned to her, almost angrily.

"Do you think we're going to *let* you?" he demanded. "Why—there may be anything down there?"

"Which is exactly why I'm going," answered Angela. "Aren't we wasting time?"

"What are we to do with her?" exclaimed the young man impotently.

Sir Julius frowned, shrugged his shoulders slightly, and stroked his moustache.

"I think Mr. Armstrong is right," he said, turning to Angela.

"Of course, I'm right!" declared Peter. "For heaven's sake, go back to your room, Angela, and wait for us there!"

To their surprise, she yielded, But when they had hastened to the main staircase and had disappeared, she prepared to follow them. The idea of waiting in her room just then was unbearable.

Then, suddenly, a new factor entered, and upset her plans. The door of Mrs. Catesby's room abruptly opened, and the housekeeper came out.

Instinctively, Angela slipped behind the curtain again, and although she now had the advantage of being unseen, she also suffered from the disadvantage of being unseeing. Half-a-minute went by before she ventured to peep from the curtain again. The passage was empty.

Had Mrs. Catesby gone back to her room? Or had she left it? Angela was seized with a burning desire to know. Softly and slowly, she crept up to the door, listened, and laid her fingers upon the door-knob. She turned the knob, and pushed. The door was now unlocked, and yielded to her pressure.

She was not surprised to find the room empty. Mrs. Catesby had evidently left the room, and had forgotten to lock the door again. Or—she might be in the inner chamber! Angela's heart missed a beat as this thought suddenly came to her.

Immediately afterwards, as always occurred on the heels of momentary weakness, she experienced the reaction of self-anger. It was ridiculous to be frightened of Mrs. Catesby. It was ridiculous of her heart to miss a beat! Mrs. Catesby was only a housekeeper. What could she do, anyway?

Nevertheless, Angela was not quite happy as she slipped across the carpet and tried the handle of the inner room. It was locked.

"What does this mean?" said a sharp voice behind her.

Angela swung round. Now, despite herself, her heart was beating fast, with fright and indignation. Mrs. Catesby's cold eyes were upon her, while her own blazed hotly back.

"What does *what* mean?" retorted the girl. "I think you've got to do the explaining, Mrs. Catesby!"

"Oh, and what have I got to explain?" asked the housekeeper. "At least, I haven't got to explain my presence in somebody else's room."

"You speak as if the house were yours!" exclaimed Angela, struggling not to feel at a disadvantage.

"No, I do not, Miss Vernon," answered the housekeeper. "But this room—technically—is mine. And I've already asked you not to come here," she added, harshly.

"Is it surprising that I come here," demanded Angela, "when Miss Ayrton's ill?"

"I am looking after Miss Ayrton."

"Who gave you the monopoly?"

Mrs. Catesby shrugged her shoulders. It was a difficult question to answer, and she chose not to answer it. Instead, she enquired,

"Have you been trying to force your way into my bedroom?"

The insolence of the question, and of the tone in which it was asked, nearly caused Angela to lose her self-control. With a great effort, however, she responded quietly,

"No, I have not been trying to force my way into your bedroom. I don't think I could force my way into any locked room, however much I wanted to. Why are you adopting this tone with me? I can't believe you'd have dared to do so if—if my uncle had been here. You don't seem to understand—your attitude is all wrong. Why, something terrible has happened here to-day, and instead of trying to help us, you stand in the way!"

She had begun quietly, but, as she proceeded and as the

injustice of the position became increasingly clear to her, her voice rose, and she ended on a passionate note. The appeal had some effect upon the housekeeper. After a short silence, Mrs. Catesby replied, in a less harsh voice,

"I think it's you who don't understand, Miss Vernon. All this is very distressing—very trying for everybody, and perhaps your nerves aren't the only ones that are preventing us from seeing and acting quite clearly. You say I'm standing in the way. I don't see how I'm doing that. I've done nothing but answer the inspector's silly questions, and look after Miss Ayrton——"

"But you won't let anybody else look after her," interposed Angela.

"It's not necessary."

"You won't even let anybody see her!"

"There you are wrong, if I may say so. I have merely kept people away from Miss Ayrton while she was not in a condition to see them. Now she is in a condition to see them, I have no objection to her seeing who she likes."

"Then I may go in?" cried Angela.

"There's no need for you to go in," retorted Mrs. Catesby, "for Miss Ayrton isn't there."

Angela stared at her, unbelievingly.

"She left me some little while ago," Mrs. Catesby went on, calmly. "Shortly after your own visit. It was a quick recovery—so quick that one may be forgiven for thinking—oh, well, never mind that. The point is, Miss Vernon, she is not *here*."

"Do you know where she is?" asked Angela.

"How should I know? In her own room, I expect. Unless she went to answer the library bell, which I think I heard ringing a minute or two ago."

"The library bell," murmured Angela; and suddenly shot

out, "Do you know what happened the last time the library bell rang?"

"Did it ring before?" enquired the housekeeper, stolidly. "No, I'm sure I don't know what happened. Nor do I know who would ring the bell, in the absence of Mr. Elderly. That inspector, I suppose."

"Davis answered the library bell the last time," said Angela, watching Mrs. Catesby closely, and then paused.

"Did he?" replied the housekeeper, without emotion. Her tone was slightly bored.

"Yes. He went in—and he never came out again."

Mrs. Catesby's eyes narrowed. Her eyebrows descended. Then, all at once, she laughed.

"What an idea," she exclaimed. "Went in and never came out again? I think we're all suffering pretty badly from nerves."

"But the inspector said so!"

"Did he?" Mrs. Catesby's tone was tart. "From some of the other things our inspector has said, I think he's sometimes a little off his head. Perhaps," she added, ironically, "Miss Ayrton has gone into the library, and disappeared. You had better go and find out."

Angela hesitated. Again her glance wandered towards the door of the inner room.

"You still refuse to let me go in there?" she asked.

"Why do you *want* to go in there, except to find out whether I'm lying or not?" Mrs. Catesby flashed back. "Of course I refuse! I'm not used to having my word doubted."

Her voice was now frankly angry, and another person's anger is apt to give one back the control of one's own. Angela turned, and walked to the door to the hallway.

"I am afraid you will have to get used to having your word doubted, Mrs. Catesby," she said, quietly, "while you

persist in locking up perfectly empty rooms. I am going to find Miss Ayrton—*wherever she is.*"

She left the room, closing the door behind her. Outside in the spacious hall, she took a deep breath. Her interview with Mrs. Catesby had taken more out of her than she had imagined.

The insolence of the woman! Something, clearly, had happened to her. Angela had never liked her; she had been too cold and reserved; but she had never forgotten her place to this extent. Psychologically, Mrs. Catesby had altered.

However, this was not the time to dwell upon Mrs. Catesby's psychology. Angela hurried to the room of her uncle's secretary, knocked, and entered.

No one was there. A quick glance round the room suggested that no one had been there since Angela's own last visit. Everything was just as it was, even to a pencil that had rolled off the table and now lay on the floor. The first thing a tidy secretary would do, surely, on entering a room and seeing a pencil on the floor, would be to pick it up.

An idea occurred to her. She rang the bell in the secretary's room, and waited.

It was quite three minutes before anyone answered the bell. Then someone slithered along the passage, and a snub-nosed, stunted little girl appeared. It was Lizzie, the kitchen-maid.

"What's happened to everybody to-day?" demanded Angela, reprovingly. "I rang three minutes ago."

"Was it you rung, miss?" asked Lizzie.

"I've just said so! Who answers this bell, as a rule?"

Lizzie pondered. The question seemed to perplex her. She rubbed her nose with a grubby finger, to the advantage of the finger and the detriment of the nose, and then imparted that she thought it was Hannah.

"And where's Hannah now?" asked Angela.

"In the kitching," replied Lizzie.

"Why didn't she answer the bell herself?"

Another perplexing question, this. Lizzie's snub nose received some further attention.

"Come, Lizzie—I want the truth," commanded Angela.

Lizzie yielded.

"'I ain't goin' up.' Hannah ses, 'not fer nobody,'" answered the kitchen-maid.

"That was very wrong of her," frowned Angela. "I shall have to speak to her. Does she generally refuse to answer bells?" Lizzie shook her head. "Then why did she refuse this time?"

"'Cos it was Miss Ayrton," Lizzie explained, carefully. "Miss Ayrton don't ring, as a rule. She calls."

"I see. Well, that doesn't excuse Hannah. I suppose Hannah sent you up, in her place?"

"No, Miss."

Angela looked at the little girl enquiringly. An odd note had entered her voice.

"Then who *did* send you, Lizzie?"

"Nobody didn't. I jest come along."

"Perhaps Hannah would have come along if she had known it was I, and not Miss Ayrton, who rang the bell? Have you seen Miss Ayrton?"

"No, miss."

"Do you know where she is?"

A tiny hesitation, then,

"No, miss."

"Speak the truth, Lizzie," advised Angela, kindly. "If you don't know where Miss Ayrton is, perhaps you *think* you know?"

"I don't know nothin', miss," the child asserted. "It's no good askin' me."

Angela changed the topic.

"Then I'll ask you something else, Lizzie," she said. "Who is Mr. Quinn?"

A look of terror entered Lizzie's eyes, but it was gone in an instant.

"Dunno, miss," she responded.

"Think again," suggested Angela, watching her closely.

The child never quivered.

"Wot nime was it, miss?" she asked, innocently.

"Quinn," repeated Angela.

"Never 'eard of 'im," she stated, solemnly. "Wot a funny nime, miss, ain't it?"

CHAPTER VIII

IN THE LIBRARY

WHILE Angela Vernon was interviewing a forbidding housekeeper and a snub-nosed kitchen-maid upstairs, Peter Armstrong and Sir Julius Hughes were having an even more interesting experience below. They reached the library door without encountering anybody in the hall, and Sir Julius was about to burst in when Peter laid his hand quickly and detainingly upon his arm.

"Wait a jiffy!" he whispered. "Let's listen!"

Sir Julius nodded, and they strained their ears for sounds inside. They heard them. Somebody was moving quietly about.

"By Jove—somebody's there!" murmured Peter.

"If we're not quick, they'll vanish," replied Sir Julius, and flung the door open.

The person inside was stooping by a bookcase. He rose and turned as they entered, and regarded them with mild eyes. It was George Geary, the workman.

"What are you doing here?" demanded Sir Julius.

" 'Avin' a look round, like," replied Geary.

"Oh, and who told you you could have a look round like?" enquired Peter. "Making yourself pretty free, aren't you?"

Geary smiled faintly.

" 'Ope I ain't doin' no 'arm," he answered, "but I ain't makin' no freer with hother folks 'n wot they're makin' with me."

"What do you mean by that?" asked Sir Julius.

"Well, it's like this, sir," said the workman. "I'm dragged 'ere, I am, and I'm kep' 'ere, I am. That don't give yer party manners."

"Perhaps not, my man," admitted Sir Julius, motioning Peter to close the door, "but that still doesn't explain what you were doing by that bookcase when we came in?"

The workman did not reply at once. Then a smile spread over his face.

"P'r'aps I wanted something to read," he suggested. "I'm a prisoner 'ere, and they ain't even give me a Bible."

Sir Julius glanced at Peter, and Peter tried not to laugh.

"Don't you think it would be a good idea if you stopped fooling?" suggested Sir Julius, sternly. "You're only making it worse for yourself by your attitude."

Geary's smile disappeared, and he became as grave as his interrogator.

"Don't see as 'ow it could be any worse, sir," he said. "If that blamed hinspector 'ad 'is way, I'd be chained ter the leg o' the kitching table. Ay, that's wot 'e'd like ter do ter me, I reckon. 'E's a mug, that feller, if ever there was one, but I ain't 'avin' any—and if I *wants* ter walk about, I'm *goin'* ter walk about. There ain't nothin' wrong in that, is there?"

His tone was half-indignant, half-appealing. Sir Julius stroked his moustache, and left Peter to reply.

"I sympathise with your desire for freedom," said Peter. "I like freedom myself. But why choose the library to walk about in?"

"Everybody's agin me," grumbled the workman, "and I ain't done nothin'. I come 'ere fer a bit o' work——"

"Yes, yes, but will you answer our question," interrupted Sir Julius.

"Orl right, sir. I'll tell yer why I come to the library. It's 'cos I 'eard the bell."

"Well, what about the bell?" exclaimed Peter, exchanging glances again with Sir Julius.

"Reckon you knows as much as I do," muttered the man.

"Can't say, till you tell us how much you know."

"This is wot I knows. The butler come in the larst time the bell rung, and 'e never come out again."

"Oh! You know that?"

"Yus."

"How did you know?"

"Same as you. 'Eard it from the inspector."

"I see. And so, hearing the bell again, you came to find out if there was going to be any more disappearing, eh?"

"That's right," nodded Geary. "That's right."

"Rather risky, wasn't it?" suggested Sir Julius.

"Owjer mean, risky?"

"Well, you might have disappeared yourself, for instance."

The faint smile reappeared for an instant.

"So might you, sir. But you come along." The logic of this was faultless. Profiting by the silence, Geary continued, but no longer with a smile. "P'r'aps we might orl on us disappear yet!"

Sir Julius gave an exclamation of annoyance. This man was fencing too well.

"So your story is," he rasped, "that you just came here to make investigations. Is that it?"

"Yus, sir—like yerself."

"I suppose you didn't ring the bell yourself, by any chance?" asked Peter.

The workman blinked.

"Go on," he said. "Wot 'd I do that for?"

"Heaven knows what anybody does anything for in this confounded house!" exclaimed Sir Julius, bursting. "But one won't find out unless one asks questions. If you want the

truth, my man, I don't believe you. You came here for some other purpose, and—and, although I haven't too high an opinion of the inspector myself, I agree with him that you've got to be watched!"

"Yes, but who's watching him?" murmured Peter.

"There you are," retorted Geary. "It's wot I ses. 'E don't know 'is job——"

"But you don't know it any better!" interposed Sir Julius.

"I ain't so sure about that, sir," said Geary. "I found somethink 'e ain't, any'ow."

"What's that?" asked Peter, quickly.

"Come 'ere, and I'll show yer," answered Geary.

For an instant, they hesitated, and it must be remembered in their favour that they were in a room from which people disappeared, and in the presence of a somewhat mysterious person. Suppose—for the sake of argument—Geary *had* rung that bell? He might just have had time, after he had gone by them on the first-floor landing. Suppose he had seen them behind their curtain, and, with deadly psychological accuracy, had known they would respond to the summons of the library bell? If this were the unpleasant, neck-twisting Quinn . . .

Thought moves fast. Even while the workman stood by the bookcase, inviting them to join him, a score of ideas flashed through Peter's mind, and now, just before he stepped forward in obedience to that invitation, he revisualized the occasions of the shot, of the locking of the dining-room door, and of the previous ringing of the library bell, trying to establish the position which the workman had occupied at each. When the shot had been fired in the dining-room, Geary had been in the library—this room—hadn't he? When the dining-room door had been locked . . .

"Oh, come on!" muttered Sir Julius.

They advanced to the bookcase. As they neared it, the workman fell back a step or two, so that he was a little be-

hind them as he pointed to one of the books in the middle shelf. Peter bent forward to examine it, but Sir Julius never took his eyes off the workman.

"Good Lord!' murmured Peter, staring.

"What is it?" asked Sir Julius, still tensely alert.

"Blood," said Peter.

Then Sir Julius did forget the workman for an instant, and the workman smiled.

"By Jove, so it is!" the M.P. exclaimed. "It looks a fresh mark, too. I wonder——"

He paused.

"What do you wonder, sir?" asked Peter. "Whose it is?" Sir Julius nodded. "Yes, so do I. Is it Mr. Elderly's—or Davis's—or somebody else's?"

"There's one for the inspector," observed Geary, sarcastically. " 'Corse, *'e'll* find out!"

"Well, we must tell him, anyway," said Sir Julius. "What book is it?"

He stretched his hand out, but Peter intervened.

"Had we better touch it, do you think?" he exclaimed. "I don't know much about this game, but it would be a pity if our finger-marks obliterated anybody else's."

"It seems to me, you know a good deal about this game," returned Sir Julius, approvingly. "You've saved me from doing a very foolish thing. No harm in reading the name of the book, anyway—'Archives de l'Anthropologie Criminelle.' H'm, rather an appropriate volume to bear a blood-stain, eh?"

"Wot's it mean?" queried the workman, curiously.

"It's a book on criminology, my man," answered Sir Julius. "A subject with which I hope you are not personally familiar."

"If it's wot Edgar Wallace writes about," answered the workman, "I knows a bit."

There was a pause. Peter found himself fighting against depression.

"Clues everywhere," he grunted, "but nowhere to take 'em."

"We'll have to take them to the inspector," replied Sir Julius. "There's no alternative, however we dislike it."

"Yes, I agree," nodded Peter, "but what about hunting around for some more first?"

They searched for other signs that might throw some light upon the impenetrable mystery. It was an odd business. Peter did most of the searching, for Sir Julius spent half his time watching Geary, while Geary was obviously impeded by the M.P.'s attitude.

The room was practically in the same condition as when the police had first entered it. The furniture was still awry, and papers still lay on the ground. It seemed odd to Peter that the inspector had not locked the room up again, until the detective arrived. If *he* had been a police official, he felt sure he would not have left this vital room open for anybody to stroll in.

The search proceeded. Peter found himself looking for secret panels. He argued that if people went into rooms by the door and did not come out by the door, the only explanation of their subsequent absence from the rooms was that they had made their exit through windows, walls, ceilings, or floors. The window of the library had been locked on the inside, and was still locked. Then, obviously, Mr. Elderly and his butler must have disappeared through the walls or the ceiling or the carpet.

He gazed at the ceiling, he turned up the carpet, he felt round the walls. He had no luck. But presently he paused before a safe by the fireplace. This safe was let into the wall, and it fascinated him.

"Rather interesting, this, don't you think?" he asked.

"Safes always are interesting," replied Sir Julius.

"I'd give a lot to open this one," said Peter. "Do you know anything about safes, Geary?"

The question was addressed to the workman, but gained no response.

"I said—do you know anything about opening safes?" repeated Peter, looking round. "Well, I'm blowed!" he exclaimed, the next instant. "He's gone!"

"Eh?" cried Sir Julius, staring. "Bless my soul—so he has!"

Geary had evidently gone very quietly, for the door was still closed. Sir Julius frowned heavily, and Peter failed to repress a slight shudder.

"I say," he said, in a low voice. "What do you think of that workman feller?"

"I don't know what I think of him," responded Sir Julius, "any more than I know what I think of anything else."

"You don't suppose—" began Peter, but did not finish the sentence.

"If you mean that he *didn't* go out of the room," snapped Sir Julius, nervily, "and that he's still in the room somewhere —oh, don't be ridiculous!"

From the form of which denial Peter deduced that Sir Julius Hughes was no happier than he was himself.

"I've a hunch that if we could open this safe, we'd find something interesting," he said, vaguely.

"And I've a hunch, as you put it, that I've found something interesting without opening your safe!" exclaimed Sir Julius, all at once. "Look there!"

He pointed to the window. A dark spot discoloured the sill.

They ran forward, like a couple of excited, nervous schoolboys; but suddenly their eyes were raised from the dark

spot, and it was forgotten. Something made a smudge against the window outside, and dropped below.

"Good God! what's that?" gasped Sir Julius.

Peter was at the window in a flash. Unfastening it, he threw it open, and leaned out. On the flower-bed, three feet below him, lay the prone, still figure of a constable.

CHAPTER IX

WHOSE HAND?

IN a trice, both Peter and Sir Julius were through the window and bending over the policeman's body. It lay on its face, the left arm crunched under it, the right arm outstretched.

"Dead," muttered Sir Julius.

"Stone dead," replied Peter.

They raised their eyes from the prone figure, and looked at each other. How had this poor fellow died? Who had killed him? And—why? But even more bewildering than these unanswerable questions was the startling suddenness of the tragedy.

As they stood staring, a shadow fell across the lawn. It was the shadow of Inspector Biggs.

"What's this?" he asked, sharply.

"One of your constables," answered Sir Julius, starting slightly; for the inspector had approached quietly, and they had not seen him until he had reached their side.

"Well, I can see that," rasped the inspector. "What's happened to him?"

"He's dead," replied Sir Julius. "I should have thought you could have seen that, too."

"Dead?" exclaimed the inspector.

He bent down swiftly, and then rose. His eyes were ominous.

"Dead," he repeated, and gazed at his companions searchingly. "Yes—Newton's dead. Which one of you killed him?"

"Neither of us killed him," answered Peter, warmly. "Can't you *ever* make investigations without accusations?"

"I come upon a dead man," returned the inspector, unruffled, "and I find two people beside him. Part of the dead man's duty was to prevent those two people from leaving the grounds. Isn't my accusation obvious?"

"No, it's not," retorted Peter, refusing to accept the inspector's logic. "It's no more obvious that we've killed the constable than that you have. We were in the library—with the window closed—when the constable fell. Where were *you?*"

Sir Julius glanced at Peter a little anxiously, while Inspector Biggs looked as though he were going to have a fit. But the official controlled himself with an effort, and responded, quietly,

"Forgive me for saying, sir, you're behaving like a fool. Let's hear your story—and be quick about it."

He motioned to two approaching figures, and a couple of constables joined the party. Their eyes grew large with astonishment as they saw their prone comrade, but Biggs cut their exclamations short, and they stood silently by.

"My story's quite simple," said Peter. "We were in the library——"

"What were you doing in the library?" interrupted Biggs.

"I thought you asked me to be quick?" returned Peter, angrily. "If you're going to start your interruptions, we shall not be through by midnight."

Biggs shrugged his shoulders.

"You're not helping yourself," he observed. "Go on."

"We went to the library because we heard the library bell, if you want to know," continued Peter. "When Davis answered that bell, he disappeared. We thought we might be able to prevent another disappearance. We searched around for a bit—and, incidentally, made one or two discoveries that

you seem to have overlooked, Inspector—and, all at once, saw a figure outside the window. It was falling. We opened the window, jumped out, saw the man was dead—and then *you* came along."

"You didn't see the figure before it fell, eh?" enquired Biggs.

"No. I've just told you," replied Peter.

"Yes. And I just heard you. But it's odd you didn't see the figure before—if it was outside here. You might have seen it, for instance, and have objected to being watched. You might have opened the window, and interviewed the figure. And, since no love was lost between you, you might have—" He broke off, then shot out, "I suppose nobody was in the library, when you got there?"

"By Jove, there was somebody—I forgot that," exclaimed Peter, with a quick glance at Sir Julius.

"You forget rather a lot," glared the inspector.

"Oh, shut up! D'you suppose I'm used to this sort of cross-examination? That workman chap was before us——"

"What!" cried the inspector, and turned upon the constables beside him. "Who's looking after him?"

"I don't know, sir," answered one of the policemen.

"I tell you, that fellow is not to be allowed to run loose!" exclaimed Biggs. "I'll have him tied up, if there's any more of this!" He turned back to Peter. "So the workman was there, too, eh? Well, if that's so, why isn't he here?"

"He left the room before we did," said Sir Julius, coldly. "Let me suggest a little less emotion, inspector. Even in the House, where we are supposed to be privileged, emotion impedes progress."

"Find him," ordered the inspector, and the two constables disappeared.

"A wise order," commented the M.P. "I agree with you that the workman is a suspicious character. He left the li-

brary so quietly that we did not see him go, and it is impossible for us to say how long he was out of the room before we ourselves left it. One minute perhaps. Possibly three. In any case, if I may put a thought into your official mind, inspector, our labouring friend has as little reason to love constables as we perhaps have, and, having been brought here by force, might conceivably have even more desire to leave the grounds."

"That's true," admitted the inspector, rather unexpectedly. "Well, I've sent for him, and I expect I'll soon know all about that. Meanwhile—I'd like to know how poor Newton met his death."

"It looks to me like a knife wound," said Sir Julius.

Biggs nodded.

"Yes, that's about the size of it. So we want to find a knife, too. Now, those things you say you found in the library. Would they be blood-stains, by any chance?"

"They would," replied Peter.

"On the window-sill, maybe, and on the back of a book?" the inspector went on, sarcastically. "Possibly I'm not such a fool as I look. And possibly I don't tell everybody all I know. Now, if you've no objection, I must ask you to return to the house. If you wander about, I'm afraid there may be some more accidents, and the accidents may not be to the constable, next time."

There was a short pause. Peter felt himself loathing the inspector more and more. He had to confess, however, that in the inspector's place he would probably have acted in the same way.

"You admit, I've got my hands full?" suggested Biggs, acidly.

"They're so full that I wonder when that detective is coming along to help you," answered Peter.

"Don't worry—he'll come sooner than you expect, maybe,"

returned the inspector. "And, when he *does* come, he can have my job with pleasure. Now then—in with you, please."

"You require no help?" asked Sir Julius, glancing at the figure of the constable.

"When I want help, I'll ask for it," snapped the inspector. "Kindly do as I say!"

Before they could obey, a shout suddenly rent the air. The origin was not immediately apparent, for it came round an angle of the house, but as the three men hurried towards it they quickly discovered the cause of the trouble. A policeman was picking himself up from the ground, and two others were gripping an indignant workman.

"Wot's the matter with yer all?" complained the workman. "Mayn't a feller take a walk?"

"You know you mayn't!" shouted Biggs, fiercely. "You're more dangerous than a mad dog!"

"Dangerous? Well, that's good, that is," panted the workman. "*Your* fellers are the dangerous ones. They comes upon me like a bloomin' havvylanche, and of corse I 'as ter 'it somebody. I on'y wish I'd 'it a bit 'arder," he added, looking vengefully at the constable who was rising from the ground. "A nice bit o' good I did fer meself, when I come to this place, I don't think!"

"A nice bit of good you *meant* to do for yourself, I've no doubt!" retorted the inspector. "Now, then, it's no good struggling!"

"I ain't strugglin'," said the workman, giving up. "I've 'ad about enough o' this. Fer Gawd's sake, 'ang me and 'ave done with it. Wot 'ave I done now?"

"You haven't killed a constable, by any chance?" suggested the inspector.

"No, I 'aven't, and on'y fer one reason," responded the workman. "I 'aven't *'ad* the charnce!"

"Where shall we take him, sir?" asked one of the workman's captors.

"Lock him in a room where he can't kick," replied Biggs. "And, if he makes any trouble, slip the bracelets on him."

"I thort this was a free country," muttered the workman, disgusted. "Seems it's a crime now even ter be hunemployed!" Suddenly he forgot his own troubles, and asked, "Wot's orl this about a constable bein' killed?"

"Perhaps you know as much as I do?" said the inspector.

"When you don't know nothin'," answered the workman. "It ain't true, is it?"

He turned towards Peter and Sir Julius, who looked the least unfriendly.

"Yes, it's quite true," Peter told him. "A constable was killed outside the library window a minute or two after you left the library. Why *did* you leave the library, by the way?"

"I went out ter kill the constable, didn't I?" retorted the workman. "Wot a 'ouse!"

He made no further protest, and was marched off.

"And now, I suppose, we may as well return to our own captivity," suggested Sir Julius to Peter. "Between you and me, I'd rather like to get into some nice, quiet room—if there is one."

"Yes, there is one, Sir Julius," Peter answered. "And I think someone is waiting for us there."

"You mean Miss Vernon?"

"Yes."

"Let us go to her. Our need is quiet reflection. For the moment, Armstrong, I admit I've no other policy."

"Nor have I," frowned the young man, gloomily. "But we'll have to get one soon, I'm thinking. Otherwise—" He paused, and looked towards the house.

"Otherwise—worse things may happen?" queried Sir Julius.

"Much worse," muttered Peter. "That's what I'm afraid of."

In the lounge hall a policeman was standing. The sight was not unexpected, but it irritated Peter intensely.

"Hallo—*you're* still alive?" he exclaimed.

"I beg your pardon, sir?" replied the policeman.

"In a short while, I expect you constables will be humming 'Ten Little Nigger Boys.'"

The policeman smiled faintly, but the joke did not appear to amuse him greatly.

They proceeded up the wide staircase. Peter's heart began to beat more rapidly. It was half due to the anticipated pleasure of seeing Angela again, and half to the fear that the pleasure might not be realised. If those "worse things" should happen? A feeling almost of nausea came over him, and he quickened his steps.

The stairs ended on the first floor in a gracious, spacious manner. The windows overlooking the grounds were long and richly curtained—it was behind one of these curtains they had screened themselves not long since—and across an ample length of soft carpet was the massive door of the housekeeper's room. To the left ran the passage to the back stairway, to the right ran the slightly wider passage that led to Angela's suite of rooms.

"I wonder if Mrs. Catesby's door is still locked?" whispered Peter.

"I don't think it will help us to test it just now," answered Sir Julius.

"No—we'd better leave that matter for the moment. There are others more important to think about. And p'r'aps we're not the only folk who know how to hide behind curtains," he added, with a grimace.

They looked towards the curtains as he spoke. An exclamation escaped him.

"Good Lord—what's that?" he murmured.

Sir Julius did not reply, but his eyes became glued to the spot where Peter was pointing.

At the foot of the curtain, its sharp edge gleaming in a little pool of sunlight, lay a knife.

CHAPTER X

THE ODDNESS OF FREDDIE

"IT seems to me," said Peter Armstrong, when he, Sir Julius, and Angela were seated in the latter's room ten minutes later, and stories had been exchanged, "we are in the middle of a pitched battle——"

"Only we don't know who are fighting, or why," interposed Sir Julius.

"And would we know which side we were on, if we did?" Peter went on. "I'm inclined to doubt it!"

"Oh, yes, we'd know whose side we were on," exclaimed Angela, turning off the electric switch as her kettle boiled. Mid-day is not the most hygenic time to take tea, but on this particular mid-day they felt privileged. "We are fighting for ourselves!"

"Sounds a bit grim, that," murmured Peter. "It suggests that all the rest are against us."

"Well, don't they seem to be?" demanded Angela. "Is there one person in this house, outside this room, whom we could invite for a heart-to-heart chat?"

"Yes, one," said Sir Julius, suddenly. "Mr. Grinton."

"Grinton! Good Lord!" exclaimed Peter; and there was a short silence.

Edward Grinton, the elderly bespectacled botanist who had sallied forth immediately after breakfast that morning to look for rare flowers, had been forgotten. He alone was ignorant at this moment of the heavy cloud that hung over Greystones, and probably imagined, as he wandered through

the hills and valleys, that everything was going on just as it always did—that he would return to an atmosphere of tennis and dancing, and bridge and pleasant laughter. What a shock lay in store for him!

"Any idea, Angela, when Mr. Grinton's coming back?" asked Peter.

She shook her head.

"I'm afraid Mr. Grinton is one of those undependable people," she answered. "He may come back before lunch, or he may stay away till sunset."

"That's a pity," mused Peter, thoughtfully. "He's an ally outside the danger-zone. If only we knew—we might make him useful!"

"How?" asked Angela.

"Why, by using him for communications with the dear old outside world," replied Peter. "Until something of that sort happens, we shall remain prisoners here, and shall have to do what everybody tells us!"

"It's just possible," suggested Sir Julius, tentatively, "that that is our wisest plan, in any case."

"All sorts of things are just possible, Sir Julius," grunted Peter. "I've even heard it's just possible the moon is made of green cheese."

Sir Julius laughed.

"I agree with you, Armstrong," he said. "This inactivity is dangerous—it's no good mincing matters—and if we go on doing what we are told, it will only be because we can't help ourselves. You see, my dear," he added, turning to Angela, "it isn't as though something had happened, and we were merely waiting to find out what it was, and who was responsible. Then our inactivity wouldn't matter. But things are *still* happening. And the difficulty is to know how to prevent their continuance."

"I'm sure I don't want to be inactive," responded Angela,

with spirit. "If you two can think of anything I can do, I'll gladly do it."

"Well, you jolly well *won't* do it," retorted Peter. "That is, unless it's pouring out tea! You might get on with that, eh? And, meanwhile, the conference can proceed. Would you like to hear a list of questions I scribbled down a little while ago?" He drew the sheet from his pocket. "There are twenty-two of 'em—and there are a few more to add, since I wrote them."

He read the queries aloud, ending with: "22. Why won't Mrs. Catesby let Angela see Miss Ayrton." And immediately afterwards he added, "23. Where *is* Miss Ayrton?"

"24. Who rang the library bell the second time," said Sir Julius.

"25. What was the workman doing in the library?" went on Peter.

"26. Why did he leave the library?"

"27. What is the explanation of the bloodstains on the book and the window-sill?"

"28. Who killed Constable Newton? Why, and how?"

"I think we know how," said Sir Julius, looking towards a knife that lay on the little table beside them. We might make Question 29—How did the knife that assumedly killed Constable Newton come to be dropped at the foot of the curtain at the head of the main staircase?"

"On the first floor—outside Mrs. Catesby's room," added Peter.

Angela could not repress a little shudder.

"You're not suggesting—" she began, but Peter interrupted her hastily.

"We're not suggesting anything, old girl," he exclaimed. "Frankly, I don't like Mrs. Catesby, but I can't attach her to the murder of Constable Newton. Look here—there's another question that ought to be down on the list. It's one

we've rather forgotten, and it bears directly upon Mr. Elderly's disappearance. 30—Why did he wire to all the people who were coming here to-day and to-morrow not to come? If we knew what was in his mind then, we'd know a lot. The whole thing, perhaps."

He paused suddenly. A startling idea had come to him.

"What is it?" asked Angela.

"I suppose," said Peter, slowly, "he *did* send off those wires?"

"But he must have," replied Angela. "Miss Ayrton said so herself."

"If she was lying, the rest of the party will turn up," added Sir Julius.

"Quite so," murmured Peter, absently, and abruptly drained the cup of tea Angela had handed to him.

A silence fell upon them. Either they had momentarily come to the end of their resources, or Peter's suggestion had opened up new channels. Or maybe the tea itself was so comforting that they decided to give their tired minds a little rest, in order to enjoy the refreshment to its full.

An unseen observer would have noted that Sir Julius Hughes looked the most worried of the three. His greater age gave him an added sense of responsibility, and he did not react so readily to the mere thrill of adventure which can make young people enjoy the most unpleasant occasions, despite themselves, and sometimes forget grave issues in the excitement of danger and novelty. Moreover, Sir Julius was spiritually alone, although physically he made a third at this intimate little party. His own main interests were hundreds of miles away, in Westminster—for which, at this moment, he had an odd longing. Yes, there lay his spiritual home! But the spiritual home of Angela Vernon and Peter Armstrong, as he could clearly see, was in this little sitting-room, or wherever the other happened to be.

"Nothing must happen to them!" he thought, suddenly.

And in that thought was born the impulse that, later on, was to lead him into strange adventure.

At the moment, however, nothing was coherent in his mind saving his kindling affection.

"One point we should decide on," he observed, breaking the long silence. "We must do nothing rash."

"The true parliamentary instinct, sir," replied Peter, smiling.

"But you agree with me?"

"*I* do!" exclaimed Angela. "If our little army dwindles any more, it will be too awful!"

"Yes, caution urges us to preserve our numbers," said Sir Julius. "You hear that, Armstrong?"

"Eh? Oh, yes—I hear," answered the young man, coming out of a reverie. "We'll be as careful as the White Knight in 'Through the Looking-Glass.' But—if things don't improve—somebody will have to do something."

"Such as?" challenged Angela.

"We'll have to—break through, Angela. I dare say one could do it, at night."

Angela laid her hand impulsively on Peter's sleeve.

"Peter!" she exclaimed. "You mustn't do anything like that! Promise!"

He fenced with her.

"I'll promise to do nothing that I don't think wise," he replied. "But, if I did try to break through, and they spotted me, I don't suppose they'd really do anything, if it came to the point. I'd rather like to test it."

"Well, I *wouldn't,*" said Angela, decidedlly. "Why, if anything happened to you, Peter——"

"There'd be only me left," chimed in Sir Julius, with a twinkle. "I don't think you need worry, my dear. He won't desert us."

"Here's a question we've forgotten!" cried Peter, abruptly. "31—Who the deuce is Quinn?"

He rose, and ran to the bell.

"I wish you wouldn't be so galvanic," complained the M.P., as Peter rang. "What's that for?"

"I want to have a few words with a certain young gentleman whose name, I believe, is 'Freddie,'" replied Peter. "He was the fellow who first mentioned the existence of Quinn."

"I'm afraid that's no good," responded Angela, shaking her head. "I've already spoken to Lizzie, as I told you, and she denied any knowledge of the name."

"Lizzie isn't Freddie," observed Peter, "and my method of tackling the question may not be yours."

"You are not proposing Chinese torture, I hope?" asked Sir Julius.

"I'm not sure that it wouldn't be justified, in the present case," answered Peter. "But I promise you my methods shall be thoroughly English."

They waited. For awhile, nobody responded to the bell. The domestic arrangements were not in good order that morning. But, when the bell had been rung a second time, steps were heard along the passage, and someone knocked on the door.

"Come in," cried Angela.

Hannah, the housemaid, entered.

"You rang, miss?" said Hannah.

"Yes, we're still permitted to ring," replied Angela, a little severely, "and I'm glad to find that you've come to your senses enough to answer the bell this time, Hannah." Hannah looked up quickly, and flushed. "But never mind that now," Angela went on. "Send Freddie to me, please. I want to speak to him."

"I'm not sure—" began the housemaid.

Angela stamped her foot angrily.

"What do you mean, you're not sure?" she cried. "Go down at once and send him here!"

"I beg your pardon, miss," murmured the housemaid, flustered.

"And so you should, Hannah! Pull yourself together, and tell the others downstairs to do so, too. We're not going to help matters, any of us, by being foolish and losing our heads!"

Hannah evaporated, and Angela's firm attitude was warmly applauded by her two companions.

"If you're as firm as that with Freddie, I think *you* can do the questioning," suggested Peter.

"No, Peter—Freddie's *your* funeral," retorted Angela, smiling. "I felt I could manage Hannah—just—but I've an idea that Freddie is going to be a bit of a handful!"

A minute later, the boy who did the boots appeared. His trade was written on his face, and also on most other parts of his anatomy. Through a maze of black, he gravely eyed his interrogators.

"Would you like to earn five pounds, Freddie?" began Peter.

"Oh, so *that's* his English method!" thought Angela. "Well, perhaps it will succeed!"

But Freddie's response was disappointing.

"Wot for?" he asked.

"For you," smiled Peter.

"Yussir," said Freddie, and rubbed his nose. "But wot d'yer want me ter do, sir?"

"Well, I suppose you'd know how to spend five pounds, if you had it?"

A gleam of humanity entered the boy's eyes.

"Not 'arf," he admitted.

"Very well, then," proceeded Peter, taking five pound

notes from his pocket. "Here they are—and they're yours if you'll just tell me who Quinn is?"

Freddie's eyes grew round. He gazed at the notes, then at Peter, and then at the others. As his eyes roamed, they suddenly came to rest at the table on which the knife lay.

"Crikey!" he muttered.

"Come, quickly, or you'll lose them!" exclaimed Peter. "Who's Quinn? It's no good pretending you don't know! Now, then—sharp! Who is he?"

Then the boy did a surprising thing. He turned, and frankly bolted through the open door. Out in the passage, a stranger was standing.

CHAPTER XI

THE DETECTIVE ARRIVES

FOR a few moments, the stranger's face was turned away. He was regarding the flying figure of Freddie. Then he swung round, and transferred his grave gaze to the three inmates of the room.

He was a tall, rather impressive figure. His hair was slightly grey at the temples, and he was clean-shaven. His eyes, in contrast to those of the inspector—Peter made the comparison instinctively, hardly knowing why he did so—were quiet and steady, and were clearly the eyes of an intelligent man. There was, indeed, a general air of reliability and efficiency about him which, in the circumstances, was peculiarly soothing.

"Our young friend seemed in a hurry," observed the stranger. "Was it the five pounds or the knife that frightened him?"

"Who are you?" asked Sir Julius.

"My name is Detective Druce," replied the stranger. "May I come in?"

"We'll be delighted if you *will* come in," responded Sir Julius, cordially. "We've been waiting for you for rather a long time."

The detective entered, and closed the door behind him. He glanced round the room rapidly, then accepted Angela's invitation to sit down.

"I'm glad to find one quiet spot in this rather restless atmosphere," he said. "So far, I have met nothing but agitation wherever I've been."

"Oh, don't worry, we've had our share of agitation," exclaimed Peter, shoving Angela's silver cigarette-box forward after an enquiring glance at her. "But let's hope we'll settle down a little now you've turned up. I suppose you want to ask us questions? Hooray! Fire away!"

The detective smiled.

"Yes, I've got quite a lot of questions to ask. But, first, I'd like one of you—choose your own spokesman—to give me as clear an account of what has happened as you can. Much of what you tell me will be repetition, but one of a detective's jobs is to listen to all versions, and to recognise the real one when he hears it. You can take it for granted, by the way, that I know of Mr. Elderly's disappearance, of the disappearance of Davis, the head butler, of the pistol shot, and of the murder—the assumed murder—of Police-constable Newton in the execution of his duty." He ticked the items off on his fingers. "Now, will you begin, please?"

Sir Julius glanced at Peter, who nodded to him. In clear language—Sir Julius was used to making speeches, although he was rarely so clear or so concise in the House of Commons—the M.P. outlined the events of the morning, seeking occasional corroboration from Peter and Angela, and now and then prompted by them. He related their movements with meticulous care, and withheld personal opinions from his narration. Peter realised the wisdom of making him the spokesman. He was sure his own narration would have been twice as long, and that numerous personal opinions would have crept in. The manner in which Sir Julius referred to Inspector Biggs without commenting on his behaviour was little short of masterly.

Detective Druce listened gravely. He did not interrupt from start to finish, but he made various notes in a little black book. Then, when the story was told, he leaned back in his chair, and considered silently for a full minute.

"I don't believe I have ever been called into a more complicated case," he said, at last, "or one which will require more tact to elucidate. Whatever is the ultimate solution of all these happenings, one thing is glaringly obvious—that we have to do with various points of view, and various interests. It is not merely a clash between two parties. Do you agree?"

"You bet, we do!" exclaimed Peter.

"There are many details which, although they are important and will eventually have to fall into place, it may be well to ignore for the moment," he proceeded. "I don't mean that they are not vital, but I've always found that chaos is best ended by concentrating upon what appear to be the biggest factors, and by letting the others more or less look after themselves.

"What are the biggest factors we have here?" he asked. "They are really the four points I already knew before you told your story—the two disappearances, the shot, and the murder."

"One moment, sir," interposed Peter. "How about the disappearance of Miss Ayrton?"

Angela nodded approvingly.

"That will be equally important when it is established," the detective admitted, "but it isn't established yet. When I have interviewed Mrs. Catesby—I understand that is the name of the housekeeper—we will know more about Miss Ayrton, I imagine, one way or the other."

"And, then, there's this blessed fellow, Quinn," said Peter.

"We'll have to make enquiries about Quinn, too. But—well, there's a case in point—a case that demonstrates the necessity of tact. If the question of Quinn is of any importance, you've already given the alarm, and possibly sealed lips that could have been opened."

"I dare say you're right, Mr. Druce," replied Peter, un-

repentently, "but I'm not going to plead guilty just yet awhile."

"I don't blame you at all," said the detective, gravely. "I may be quick to have opinions, Mr. Armstrong, but I'm slow to pronounce judgments. I don't even blame Inspector Biggs yet——"

"Ah, Biggs!" cried Peter. "By God, there's a genius for you."

"Peter!" murmured Angela. "Can't you be quiet for ten seconds, dear?"

The "dear" slipped out. Peter suddenly forgot all about the inspector, and the detective, and everything else. A delicious cloud had descended upon him, blotting out the significance of all the words in creation saving one small word of four letters. Meanwhile, profiting by his condition, Detective Druce was continuing:

"But I can't be too earnest in impressing upon you all the necessity of care and caution. We've got to get a cat out of a bag, but if we don't handle the animal very delicately, it will slip out of our fingers before we get a look at it."

"I don't think it's necessary to impress that point upon us any further," said Sir Julius. "We promise to behave most discreetly. But—without undue emotion, I hope—I may mention that I am interested in your views of Inspector Biggs."

"So am I," added Peter, dragged out of his reverie by that unsavoury name.

Detective Druce did not reply at once. He considered the point for quite twenty seconds. Then, arriving at a decision, he became more confidential than he had been up to that moment.

"I'm not sure whether it's wise to tell you," he said, slowly, "but I'll risk it. Understand, I'm not committing myself. But

I'm far from satisfied with the intelligence of Inspector Biggs."

"Bravo!" exclaimed Peter, cordially. "Motion carried, nem. con."

"At least, he had the intelligence to send for you," observed Sir Julius.

"H'm," answered Druce. "Well—if he doesn't make an utter fool of himself, I'll see that he gets all the official credit possible when we're through. Meanwhile, if he appears officious, or if you don't understand any of the things he does, please let him have full rein. I've a particular reason for asking this—which I may tell you later. Of course, you can always refer any point to me afterwards."

Sir Julius looked relieved.

"I can't tell you how glad I am you've come," he said, sincerely. "We needed a captain badly, and we didn't like the skippering of the inspector. You mentioned the necessity for sticking to the main details just now. Well, how do you propose to deal with them? Or is my question indiscreet?"

"It's thoroughly indiscreet," returned the detective, "but I'm going to answer it. You see," he went on, after a little pause, "I want to gain your confidence as much as you want to gain mine."

"Our confidence!" repeated Peter, and laughed. "I say, forgive my emotion, but you're treating us so differently from the inspector that I'm rather overwhelmed. We're all suspects with him. May I take it we aren't, with you?"

"You must draw your own conclusions," answered the detective, smiling slightly.

"We're drawing 'em," said Peter. "Tell me this. You hold the reins, I suppose?"

"Yes."

"Then are we free now to do what we like, and to go where we like?"

To their surprise, the detective shook his head.

"I'm afraid that's impossible," he returned. "If I reverse everything Inspector Biggs has done as soon as I arrive, I shall cease to have his coöperation. That's obvious, isn't it? I can't afford to fall out with him—yet. But don't worry. This situation won't last for ever, and your patience will be rewarded in the end." He turned to Sir Julius. "You asked me what I was going to do? When I've finished my interviews—and I've several more to get through yet, including one with the housekeeper—I shall probably concentrate on the library. Yes, I believe the root of the trouble lies in the room where the trouble began. Anyway, I ought to pick up some interesting fingerprints."

A thought occurred to Peter.

"You'll find some of ours," he remarked, glancing at Sir Julius. "And also some of that workman fellow. I say—what do you think of *him?*"

"Nothing yet," replied Druce, rising. "I've not seen him. That's a pleasure to come. You know," he added, with a frown, "Inspector Biggs has a little method in his madness. My investigations in the library would be much simpler if fewer people had made investigations there before me." His tone bore no reproof, if the words did. "In the same way, I wish you hadn't found that murderous-looking knife. Your finger-prints are probably interwoven with the finger-prints of the person who used the knife—and your alibis, I know, haven't satisfied Inspector Biggs. By the way, have you shown him this knife?"

"No," answered Peter, rather uncomfortably.

"That's a pity."

"Well, it's his own fault," burst out Peter. "He could have had our full coöperation if he'd gone your way to work."

The detective took up the knife, and carefully pocketed it. Then, with a nod, he abruptly left them.

"I feel better," exclaimed Sir Julius, when they were alone again.

"So do I," agreed Peter, "but I wish he wouldn't treat us quite so much like children."

"In his particular line, we are children," said Sir Julius. "And, for my part, I'm content to remain one. Now *he's* got all the responsibility, and my mind is relieved."

Meanwhile, the detective who now had all the responsibility strolled leisurely along the passage till he came to the housekeeper's room. He stopped at the door, and knocked. A harsh voice from inside asked him what he wanted.

"I am Detective Druce," answered that individual. "When I knock, I usually want to come in."

The door opened, and Mrs. Catesby put her head out.

"Oh—so you're the detective," she observed, without enthusiasm. "I was wondering when you'd come along. You want to see me?"

"Presently, perhaps. But I want to see Miss Ayrton first. Will you tell me where she is?"

They looked at each other searchingly. Then Mrs. Catesby shrugged her shoulders slightly, and said,

"She's inside."

"In your bedroom?"

"Yes."

"You told Miss Vernon that she wasn't."

"I know I did. She came bothering around. Miss Ayrton was in no condition to see her, or anyone."

"Well, she will have to be in a condition to see *me*," answered Detective Druce, dryly.

"As you like," said the housekeeper, and, taking a key from her pocket, she handed it to the detective, and stood aside.

"So you locked her in," commented the detective. "That's hardly a usual course."

"These aren't usual times," retorted the housekeeper, as he inserted the key.

Five minutes later, Detective Druce was back in Angela's room.

"I've seen Miss Ayrton, and I don't like the look of her at all," he said. "Will one of you go for a doctor?"

CHAPTER XII

GERTRUDE AYRTON

THE detective's request came as a bombshell. It sent all previous conceptions up into the air, and when they came down again, they assumed a new angle. The effect was not produced by the information that Miss Ayrton was ill, for this had been anticipated, but by the suggestion that the doctor should be fetched by Peter, or Sir Julius, or Angela.

"I suppose I *did* hear you correctly?" asked Peter.

"What do you mean?" replied Druce.

"Why, for an hour we have been told that we mustn't leave this place, and every time we poke our noses out of a door, we get into trouble. And now——"

"And now I ask you to fetch a doctor. Well, that merely proves that I do not see eye to eye with Inspector Biggs in all things."

"The inspector will not make any trouble, when he sees us going?" enquired Sir Julius.

"His merry constables won't shoot us on sight?" added Peter.

"I'll see to that," answered the detective. "Miss Ayrton's condition is serious, and although it's not going to be my policy to quarrel with Inspector Biggs, or to interfere with his policy more than necessary, in an urgent matter of this sort I shall certainly over-ride him. Well, who will go?"

Sir Julius and Peter looked at each other enquiringly.

"Who is the doctor?" asked Angela. "I didn't know there was one near here."

"Apparently, there isn't one near here," responded Druce, referring to a little slip of paper. "His name is Dr. Glade, and he lives at The Birches, Brymoor. Mrs. Catesby——"

"Oh, you got the address from Mrs. Catesby?" interposed Peter.

"Yes. She wrote it down. She says that Dr. Glade's house is about four miles away. She's added here—quite a methodical lady, Mrs. Catesby—'Turn left at cross-roads one mile before village, and follow lane for two miles. House on right.' I expect the chauffeur will know the way, anyhow."

"Is Fox allowed to go, too, then?" exclaimed Angela, involuntarily.

"If Fox is the chauffeur, of course he will be allowed to go," answered the detective. "Anyone will be allowed to go, if I say so."

He spoke simply, but with quiet authority. Angela gave a sigh of relief.

"Don't you feel as though a cloud had been lifted?" she cried, turning to Peter.

"Yes, I do, rather," said Peter. "You'd better take those clouds out of your picture, Angela!"

He glanced towards Angela's little canvas, and Sir Julius and the detective followed his glance and regarded it, also.

"I don't want to dash you, but don't be too confident," remarked Druce, grimly. "The clouds haven't quite lifted yet."

"Never mind, they're lifting," insisted Peter. "Dash it all, mayn't even a detective be optimistic? Naturally, we're all sorry for Miss Ayrton, but—don't think me callous—I'm not sure that her illness hasn't worked a useful miracle!" He turned towards Sir Julius again. "I think I'll go for the doctor, sir, if you don't mind?"

Sir Julius hesitated. Out of the corner of his eye he had noted the momentary anxiety that had shot into Angela's face.

"I'd rather like to go myself, if it's all the same to you," he replied. "May I?"

Peter's face fell for an instant; but then he, too, caught sight of Angela's expression, and he suddenly smiled.

"Yes, p'r'aps you're right," he nodded. "I'll stay behind and look after Miss Vernon."

"Good! Then that's settled," exclaimed the detective. "And, if I may say so, the sooner you start, the better."

He walked to the door, and Sir Julius rose.

"I'm afraid you will have a little difficulty with the inspector," he observed, "but that, after all, is your affair. Suppose the inspector suggests that there is no necessity for two people to go for the doctor, and that the chauffeur could go alone, and take a note?"

"You anticipate troubles, sir," returned Druce, a little dryly.

"The parliamentary mind," pleaded Sir Julius. "Though I think even a layman would anticipate trouble where Inspector Biggs was concerned."

"I shall tell Inspector Biggs," said Druce, "that the doctor may need convincing that the case is a grave one, and that a Member of Parliament may have more influence with a local physician than a chauffeur."

"How did you know I was a Member of Parliament?" asked Sir Julius.

"Perhaps I, also, have the parliamentary mind," responded Druce. "But it wouldn't have been necessary. I have had most specific descriptions of you all from the inspector."

"Ah, true," murmured Sir Julius. "I expect he has also supplied you with our finger-prints. By the way, Mr. Druce, as I am to impress the local physician—what is his name? Glade?—with the gravity of Miss Ayrton's condition—wouldn't it be just as well if I knew something of her condition? At present, I admit, I do feel a little in the dark."

"You can see her, if you like," suggested the detective.

The suggestion was received with favour, on personal as well as logical grounds. Just as the fetching of the doctor was a welcome blow at the authority of Inspector Biggs, so the seeing of Mr. Elderly's secretary would be a welcome score off the officious housekeeper.

"Is the invitation extended to all three of us?" asked Angela.

"I don't see why not," Druce replied.

Headed by Druce and Sir Julius, the party left the room. Peter lingered a few paces behind in order to whisper his satisfaction to Angela.

"Weather brightening considerably, eh?" he murmured in her ear. "Depression lifting off the North-West of Ireland."

"Yes, things do look better," Angela whispered back. "I'm awfully glad the detective's come. But don't forget what he said, Peter."

"What did he say?"

"Don't you remember? He said, 'Don't be too confident—the clouds haven't lifted yet.'"

"Official caution, my child! Bad workmen always brag about what they're going to do, and do nothing, but good workmen never give any promises, and do everything. Druce is a good workman!"

"Oh, I do hope so," exclaimed the girl, and was silent for a moment. Then she went on, "You know, Peter, I'm sure Mr. Druce has got some idea at the back of his mind we don't know anything about. I was watching him. He's—he's no more happy about—about the way things are being handled than we are."

"He'd be a fool if he were happy," grunted Peter.

They were nearing the housekeeper's room. They recalled the last time they had made the trip together—to conceal themselves ignominiously behind a curtain. Suddenly Peter

felt a slight pressure against his shoulder. Angela at that instant, was very close.

"I'm *glad* you're not going for the doctor, Peter," she whispered. "Somehow—I like you around."

Sir Julius and the detective were already waiting outside the door of Mrs. Catesby's room, and were eyeing them. Perhaps it was as well.

As they hurried forward, the door opened, and Mrs. Catesby stood in the doorway.

"Well—what is it now?" she asked, sourly.

"We wish to see Miss Ayrton," replied Druce.

"What for? The doctor will see her."

"He will. But why shouldn't we?"

Mrs. Catesby stood aside. Her expression said that she had crossed swords with the detective before, and that it would merely be waste of time to cross swords with him again, but it showed no appreciation of detective methods. As her unwelcome guests trooped in, she turned away, and ignored them. There was no need to play the hostess to intruders.

Druce knocked on the door of the inner room. He knocked softly, as a mere formality. There was no invitation from within, and after waiting a second he turned the handle quietly.

The bedroom was in half-darkness. The blind had been lowered, and only a diffused light filtered on to the bed in which Miss Ayrton lay. She lay perfectly silent, and for an instant Angela caught her breath.

"She's—not dead?" she whispered.

Druce shook his head, and invited them to step closer.

They stood round the silent form, and Peter noticed, for the first time, how attractive Mr. Elderly's secretary was. Even with her eyes closed—and beauty lies mainly in the eyes —she was an appealing figure. Her dark brown hair, dark

brown with an auburn hint, made a striking contrast against the dead white pillow, and her lips were prettily curved.

But perhaps her most arresting feature was her paleness. All trace of colour seemed to have left her cheeks.

"Do you agree I am right in demanding a doctor?" asked Druce, quietly.

"Poor child!" answered Sir Julius.

They were not in the room for over sixty seconds, yet the picture of Miss Ayrton, lying still and silent in the mellow light, stayed long in their minds.

Mrs. Catesby paid no attention to them as they walked back through her sitting-room. She had her back to them, and was gazing out of the window. When they were outside in the hall again, with the door closed upon her, they paused.

"Please arrange for the chauffeur to drive me over at once," said Sir Julius, shortly.

"We'll go now," answered Druce, and glanced up at a clock on the wall. "It's half-past twelve. You'll be there before one."

"We'll put off lunch till you come back, Sir Julius," added Angela. "That is, if our dislocated staff can be induced to get us any lunch at all."

"One must eat," observed Peter. "I believe they eat even in prison."

As the detective and Sir Julius descended to the front hall, the former raised his eyebrows slightly, and queried,

"Well? What did you think?"

"The same as you, I should imagine," answered Sir Julius. "Drugged."

"It looked like it."

"In which case—how does Mrs. Catesby stand?"

"Exactly," said the detective.

Inspector Biggs was standing in the lounge hall. He was frowning heavily.

"What's this?" he demanded, in truculent tones.

"What's what?" asked Druce, coolly.

The inspector turned away from the detective, and addressed Sir Julius.

"Where are you going?" he demanded.

"Mr. Druce will tell you," replied Sir Julius.

"With pleasure," said Druce. "I have just been up to see Miss Ayrton. She is ill—very ill. I have asked Sir Julius to go for a doctor, and he has very kindly consented to do so."

"Go for a doctor?" exclaimed the inspector, incredulously. "Is that necessary?"

"I have told you, Miss Ayrton is very ill."

"Perhaps *I'll* have a look at her!"

"It would have been an excellent idea, inspector. But you're just a little late."

"Very, well," barked the inspector, "there's no need for Sir Julius to trouble. I'll send one of my men."

"Inspector Biggs!" Druce's tone was crisp, and his words rang out suddenly like bullets. "You will kindly accept my ruling in this matter. We have our hands full. Your men are needed here. Sir Julius isn't. Is it necessary for me to say any more?"

During the short silence that followed, the detective looked steadily at the inspector, and the inspector glared back.

"All right—have it your own way," snapped the inspector. "Only if—if things happen, don't blame me."

"I'll try not to," said Druce, and turned on his heel.

As they walked towards the garage, Sir Julius asked a question.

"Mr. Druce," he said quietly. "Is there anything you'd like me to do, while I'm out, in addition to fetching that doctor?"

"Well, I suppose the doctor's got a telephone," replied Druce. "You might ring up Scotland Yard, speak to my as-

sistant—his name is Barlow—and tell him to carry out the provisional instructions I left with him before I came away. He'll understand."

Sir Julius stopped short.

"Do you mean," he exclaimed, in astonishment, "that you've come up this morning in response to Biggs's summons, from Scotland Yard?"

"Inspector Biggs never sent for me," answered Druce. "I was coming up on this case anyway."

CHAPTER XIII

AN UNCOMFORTABLE JOURNEY

A FEELING of strange elation pervaded Sir Julius Hughes as he watched Fox, the chauffeur, bring the car slowly out of the garage. He felt like a schoolboy, suddenly released from the tedium of supervision, or a prisoner who, pronounced "Not Guilty" by an unexpectedly beneficent court, walks out once more into bewildering, intoxicating freedom. Detective Druce, having delivered him into the presence of the chauffeur, and having given the chauffeur his instructions, had returned to the house, "to put in some work in the library," as he had said; and Sir Julius and Fox were now alone.

Fox was not perhaps the kind of companion one would have chosen for a holiday mood. He was tall and thin and pale, and had made a not very successful attempt to produce side-whiskers. If he danced, it was fifty-fifty that he tangoed rather well. The best tangoists are not always the most cheerful comrades. Nevertheless, Sir Julius was grateful for him, and decided to make the best of him; and he noted, with vague relief, that the chauffeur seemed out to make the best of Sir Julius. In fact, it was Fox who made the first social advances.

"Dunno 'ow *you* feel, sir," said Fox, "but I'll be glad to 'ave a spell outside this place—that's 'ow *I* feel."

"It is evident we feel alike," replied the M.P., smiling.

"Ay, that's 'ow *I* feel," repeated the chauffeur. "It wouldn't matter to me, not if we was goin' farther than the doctor's, no, it wouldn't."

"Let us be thankful for small mercies, Fox," observed Sir Julius. "But have you had such a bad time, then?"

"Well—it's jest *uncomfortable,* if you get me," answered Fox. "Uncomfortable. That inspector feller—'e fair got on my nerves."

"He did not exactly suit mine," admitted Sir Julius.

"Ay, fair on my nerves," the chauffeur went on, seemingly more interested in his own trials than in those of Sir Julius, or of anybody else. "Comin' round and askin' questions. 'Where was you when it 'appened?' 'What time was it?' 'What was you doin',' 'Why did you do it?' " He closed the bonnet, which he had been examining. "Acted as if 'e thought *I'd* put Mr. Elderly away. So 'e did."

"Yes, I imagine he gave everyone that impression," responded Sir Julius, soothingly. "But let us be moving, eh? After all, although you and I may be enjoying our little holiday, we *have* a mission, you know."

"I know that," nodded Fox. "If you'll get in, sir, we'll start right away."

As he took his seat beside the chauffeur, Sir Julius reflected upon this odd intimacy. He was not sure that he altogether approved of it. A kindly man, he had learned to mistrust familiarity in his inferiors—and a chauffeur was admissibly inferior to a Member of Parliament. It destroyed efficiency, and impeded advancement. Still, this was not a normal morning. Values had temporarily changed, standards had altered, and perhaps Sir Julius's own ebullition had loosened Fox's tongue and rendered him slightly over-voluble. Well, well, what did it matter? Normality would reassert itself in due course.

The car was a Vauxhall two-seater. As it left the yard and began to move down the driveway, Sir Julius asked what was going to happen when the doctor joined them.

"There's a dicky," replied Fox.

"Dickies were made for man's discomfort," murmured Sir Julius. "I should have thought you'd have selected a larger car."

"There wasn't no selection about it, sir," said the man. "This is the only car that's still in running order."

"What do you mean by that?" demanded Sir Julius, and suddenly gave an exclamation. "You don't mean to say the cars have been tampered with?"

Fox nodded.

"Someone's been at 'em, sir," he answered, sourly. "It's a game!"

"Well, one point is clear, anyway," commented Sir Julius. "Whoever is at the bottom of this is a genius at the game! He can spirit people away, fire pistols, ring bells, cut telephone wires, and smash motor cars, without giving anybody a chance to see him at the job! Is he as clever as he seems—or are we all blind? Is there some amazingly simple explanation of it all?"

The car reached the end of the drive, slowed up, and stopped. The portly form of Constable Dawkins reared up before them.

"I understand I'm to let you pass," he said, heavily.

"You understand right, for once," replied Fox.

"Now, then, no back chat," retorted the constable, and turned to Sir Julius. "It's to fetch a doctor, isn't it?"

"If you have received official instructions to let us by," answered Sir Julius, "there is no need for you to ask any superfluous questions, or for me to answer them. Kindly open the gate."

Dawkins was withered. His mouth, which had opened during the M.P.'s tart little speech, now closed with a snap, and he stepped aside. The car purred forward, and gained the lane.

"Thank God!" murmured Sir Julius, involuntarily.

Not until he was outside the gate did he realize how low had been his expectations.

The car turned to the right, and began its journey through the shady lanes. For half-a-mile, they travelled in silence. Then the chauffeur lifted his foot from the accelerator, and resumed their interrupted discourse.

"It's my belief," he observed, "it's a madman."

"All criminals are mad," replied Sir Julius, "so that doesn't get us much farther."

"Ah, but I mean a loonertick," explained Fox. "Feller that's escaped."

"It's possible," agreed Sir Julius, "though, frankly, I think we'll find some other explanation."

"Only a loonertick'd act in such a way," insisted Fox. "I 'ad a brother that was a loonertick. The things 'e did, you'd never guess."

"I don't think I'll try to," responded Sir Julius. "How about putting on a little speed?"

"'E used to go about with a bread-knife," said Fox, reminiscently. "'E'd stick it into curtains, and then look disappointed when there wasn't nobody be'ind 'em."

Sir Julius decided that the chauffeur's supply of useful conversation had been exhausted, and to encourage him no more. Fox mentioned one or two other unpleasant things his brother had done, and then relapsed into silence. His expression suggested that, although he was giving no more details, he could very easily, if he liked.

In five minutes, they reached the cross-roads. They had met no one on the road, and Sir Julius found himself wondering why John Elderly had selected such a lonely district to retire to. The lanes were not merely lonely; they were gloomy. Oppressive woods, stretching forward to the very borders of the lanes, shut out the full light of the day, and often the trees met overhead. The surface of the lanes,

also, was a warning to those who loved creature-comfort. Full of ruts and depressions, and often green with the fringes of truant grass, it spoke of neglect. Nature did not smile here: she grinned at man's impotence. . . .

"We turn to the left here," said Sir Julius.

"I know," answered Fox. "Two miles along. Dr. Glade. The Birches. I've got it."

For some reason which he could not explain, Sir Julius began to feel depressed. Half the journey was accomplished, but half remained, and an uneasy sensation got hold of him that it would prove the more difficult half. He could not account for the sensation. Perhaps it was the grimness of the surroundings they were passing through. Perhaps it was a grey cloud that was just obscuring the sun. Perhaps it was reflection of the chauffeur's own uneasiness—if the fellow's silence and odd manner could be so interpreted. Or perhaps it was just reaction, or nerves.

"There's a big 'ill a'ead," remarked the chauffeur, suddenly.

"So I see," responded Sir Julius. "I was wondering whether *you* did?"

"Why?"

"Because of the pace we're going." The chauffeur did not slacken. "Is it really necessary to go so fast?" asked Sir Julius, as anxious now to reduce speed as he had been a few minutes before to increase it.

"Yes, there is," replied Fox. "We're being follered."

Sir Julius's heart gave a jump. He turned his head instinctively, but could see nothing. When he turned his head back again, he saw the steep hill.

"Steady, man!" he exclaimed. "There's nobody! Don't lose your nerve!"

The chauffeur did not reply, nor did he touch the foot-brake. His policy may have been faulty, but he proved him-

self now a skilled driver, and a brilliant manipulator of the wheel.

"Slow down!" shouted Sir Julius! "Do you hear? Slow down!"

The car swayed, slowed abruptly, and swung aside. The next moment—or was it the next year?—Sir Julius found himself sitting by the roadside.

"You fool!" he muttered, feeling himself to find out whether any bones were broken. "Why did you do that? Where are you?"

His head was buzzing, but he realised that, by the grace of God, he was not seriously damaged. He stared around, and found the chauffeur standing beside the car. The car had not overturned, but was jammed in a ditch.

"Well, well, why don't you say something?" exploded Sir Julius. "By all rules of logic, both you and I ought to be dead at this moment! It's no thanks to you we're alive, anyway."

"I did the best I could," muttered the chauffeur, advancing a step or two. "I slowed up. It was that what did it."

"It was your ridiculous speed that did it!"

"No, sir. We skidded. When I slowed up." He shook his head gloomily. Sir Julius noticed that he was holding a large spanner.

"What's that for?" he demanded.

"What?"

"That spanner?"

"Oh, this?" The man considered it. "It was shot out when the car stopped. I just picked it up off the ground."

Sir Julius regarded him, and rose. Fox seemed shaken, and doubtful of his next step.

"Well, I'll say this for you, my man," remarked Sir Julius, slowly. "You're a fool—forgive my plain speaking—but you know something about driving, all the same. Perhaps that is your trouble—you want to show your cleverness. It was un-

doubtedly clever to slow up and steer into that ditch without overturning the car, as you've done!"

The chauffeur did not reply immediately. He still seemed to be thinking.

"You'd 'ave been all right, sir, if you 'adn't jumped from the car," he muttered.

"Did I jump?" snapped Sir Julius. "I have no recollection. I think, rather, I was propelled. And I may remind you, I'm still waiting for your explanation!"

"I told you," answered Fox, sullenly. "I thought we was being follered."

"And I told you I saw no evidence of it," exclaimed Sir Julius, his temper rising. His bruises did not permit, for the moment, his usual self-control. "Where's the person who was following us? He's had plenty of time to catch up with us by now, hasn't he?"

"Yes, sir?"

"Then where is he?"

They looked up the hill. Nobody was in sight. His wrath growing on him, Sir Julius rasped on.

"A nice mess you've made of this! We shall have to walk the rest of the way, and time's precious. Confound it—my head's like a bee-hive. . . . What the devil are you still hugging that spanner for?"

"Eh?" said the chauffeur.

An odd moment passed. Sir Julius did not know whether he suddenly lost consciousness or not. All at once, Fox became very large, and then all at once grew small again. Sir Julius passed his hand across his head, blinked, and straightened himself.

"Come, come, this won't do!" he muttered. "Let's be moving. Dr. Glade's house can't be far from here——"

He stopped abruptly. An elderly, silver-haired man was regarding them from the roadside.

CHAPTER XIV

DR. GLADE

"CAN I do anything?" queried the old gentleman, with amiable anxiety? "I hope you're not badly hurt?"

Sir Julius studied the newcomer for a moment, then responded.

"Thank you—only a few bruises, I think. But there is something you can do. You can tell me how far I am from The Birches—Dr. Glade's house."

The old gentleman smiled amusedly.

"Dr. Glade's house is only fifty yards away—behind that clump of trees over there," he said. "I am Dr. Glade."

"Well, that's most opportune!" exclaimed Sir Julius, hoping that by this little act of kindness the Fates were trying to make amends. "You've come at a most necessary moment. Was it a coincidence, or did you hear the crash?"

"I heard the crash," answered the doctor. "These motor-cars! Terrible! Or, perhaps I should say—not the motor-cars, eh, but the drivers?"

He glanced with a rather whimsical expression at the chauffeur as he spoke. Fox looked sullen.

"Yes, the car's certainly done for, for the time being," remarked Sir Julius, "but I agree with you that it wasn't exactly the car's fault. Have *you* a car, may I ask?"

"A country practitioner without a car would be as useful as a revolver without any bullets," observed Dr. Glade. "Yes, I have a car—*and* I drive it myself."

He glanced again at the chauffeur, and chuckled softly.

"That's fortunate," replied Sir Julius. "Someone is ill at Greystones, and you are needed there rather badly."

"Greystones?" repeated Dr. Glade. "That is Mr. Elderly's house, is it not?"

"Yes."

"I hope Mr. Elderly himself is not ill? A charming man. I should be sorry indeed if anything happened to Mr. Elderly."

Sir Julius frowned. How far was it wise to confide facts to Dr. Glade? He left the question undecided while answering.

"It is Mr. Elderly's secretary—Miss Ayrton. Perhaps you know her?"

"Miss Ayrton? Oh, yes. I have met her once or twice. A nice girl—yes. Very nice. But you look a trifle ill yourself, sir, if I may say so."

"Oh, you needn't worry about me. A wash and a rub down will cure me, when I can get them. Could you get out that car of yours and come along at once?"

Dr. Glade pursed his lips, and continued to regard Sir Julius quizzically.

"You will excuse me, but I must repeat, you look very ill," he murmured. "Wouldn't you like to come to my house?"

Sir Julius was about to protest, and to suggest that time would be saved if the doctor returned alone and brought the car along, when he recalled the second commission he had been instructed to carry out. Of course—he had to telephone to Scotland Yard. He could not return without doing that. The accident had muddled his mind, and nearly made him forget.

"Well, perhaps I will come along," he said, "but I am anxious to lose as little time as possible."

"We will make all haste," declared the doctor, briskly. "Your chauffeur had better come along, too. No one will

run away with his car, this is quite obvious. H'm, yes."

"I dunno—p'r'aps *I'd* better wait 'ere," suggested Fox, with his eyes on the doctor.

"Come, come, don't be foolish," retorted Dr. Glade. "What use would that be? We would only have to stop to pick you up again, and we must be quick, isn't that so? Very well, then. You can help me get the car out. And it needs petrol. You can see to that, while I attend to my patient."

"I insist that you do not regard me as a patient," said Sir Julius, as they began to walk along the road. "There is nothing wrong with me. As a matter of fact," he added, dropping his voice, "my main reason for accompanying you back is because I want to use your telephone, if I may?"

The point did not appear to interest the doctor.

"That fellow of yours is very surly," he commented. "I should not care to sit beside him while he was driving. No, thank you. Now, I never have an accident. I am too careful. 'Life,' I say, 'is for but a short time. Why make it shorter?' " He smiled. "After all, is it not my business to make life longer, eh? Or to prevent people from shortening it by doing foolish things? This accident—how did it happen? On the hill, I suppose? It is madness to rush down hills! How you were not killed . . ."

He rattled on. Sir Julius fell quite contentedly into the rôle of listener. Still, he would soon have to do a little speaking himself. He could not bring Dr. Glade into the peculiar atmosphere of Greystones without some preliminary warning.

They reached the doctor's house, the doctor still talking. A gate with creaking hinges opened on to a pleasant green lawn, round which ran a wide gravelled path. The path was just wide enough for a car to travel round it without touching the grass on one side and the tangled flower-border on the other. The garage and the house stood some forty yards back from the road.

Inhabited by a pleasant family, with two or three jolly children to climb the great trees and stick cricket-stumps into the lawn, The Birches might have been a very agreeable place. In the total absence of such pleasant family life, however, it was far from agreeable. The trees closed it in, imprisoning it from the road, and a spirit of solitude was mournfully insistent.

"You're not much in the way of getting patients here, are you?" asked Sir Julius, abruptly.

"My practice is not overwhelming," admitted Dr. Glade. "But it just keeps me occupied—and I have killed enough patients in my time to have no financial need to kill any more." He chuckled at his lugubrious jest. "Now, if you will step inside—the door is open—I will take the chauffeur round to the garage, and he can fill the petrol tank while I give you a drink."

"Or while I telephone?" suggested Sir Julius.

"Just step inside, please—I will be with you in one minute," said the doctor.

The house was old, and creeper-clad. Leaves clinging round the windows made war against the light, and it was several seconds after passing inside before Sir Julius could distinguish the configuration of the hall. Then he noted that the hall was fairly spacious, with a staircase running upwards towards the back, and rooms opening out on each side.

He waited awhile in the hall. He was annoyed at the self-control he found it necessary to exert. Why was there any need of self-control at all? He had reached his destination, the doctor would soon be here, he would telephone to Scotland Yard—the prospect of that was particularly intriguing, and he decided to add certain remarks of his own to Detective Druce's message—and, within a very few minutes, they would be speeding back to Greystones, his missions successfully accomplished.

Why worry, then?

"I expect it's my head," reflected Sir Julius. "I must have got a bit of a bump."

A vision of Fox holding the spanner flashed into his mind. And then another vision of Fox suddenly growing larger, and afterwards smaller again.

"I wonder if I *did* go off for a second?" he thought. "Oh—confound it all!"

A tap was dripping somewhere. There is little more depressing than a dripping tap, when you are not in the mood for it. He looked along the passage, towards the point from which the dripping seemed to come. Something materialized at the end of the passage, moved, and grew larger—just as Fox had done.

" 'Oo's there?" asked the approaching thing.

The voice was old and thin. It belonged obviously to a very old woman, but Sir Julius could only see her outline vaguely, as she stopped in the shadows. The outline did not attract him.

"I am waiting for Dr. Glade," he replied. "He will be here in an instant."

"Waitin' for Dr. Glade, hey?" said the old woman. "Well, there's no accountin' for tastes."

And she retreated with a malicious cackle.

"Nasty old lady!" muttered Sir Julius, and, turning, found the doctor at his elbow.

"Yes, yes, I'm inclined to agree with you," observed the doctor. "But she costs little, and she cooks well. Come into the sitting-room. I'm sorry I've kept you so long."

"Don't apologise," returned Sir Julius. "If you can just show me where the telephone is——"

"But I *must* apologise," interposed the doctor, shaking his silver locks deprecatingly. "I hate being kept waiting myself, and so I hate keeping people waiting. Do as you would be

done by—an excellent motto, that. So let me explain the delay. Your chauffeur has been telling me something of the trouble at Greystones. Dear me! It sounds a most terrible affair. My dear friend, Mr. Elderly, disappeared! It seems impossible, in these modern times, eh? Well, well, he must be found——"

"Of course, he must be found," exclaimed Sir Julius, beginning to show his annoyance at the doctor's volubility. "Part of my object in being here at this moment is to attempt to find him. You'll remember, I asked whether I could use your telephone?"

"My telephone?" blinked Dr. Glade. "Bless my soul, but how do you know I've got a telephone?"

"Well, haven't you?" snapped Sir Julius. "Really, doctor, I think you might be a little more helpful——"

"You *are* ill! I said so all along!" declared Dr. Glade. "Your nerves—they're all gone to pieces. And I don't wonder. Now, sit down for a moment. Sit down!"

He held up an admonishing finger, as though he were lecturing a small child. Sir Julius could stand it no longer.

"I don't want to sit down!" he cried, angrily. "Why don't you listen to me? I am not ill, and I do not intend to wait here one moment longer than is necessary. Surely, since you say the chauffeur has told you the position, you can realise its urgency? You say you haven't a telephone——"

"Pardon me, sir, I said nothing of the sort," retorted Dr. Glade, now showing some asperity himself. "And the attitude you are adopting only proves the accuracy of my diagnosis. I can see you are not a man who would ordinarily treat a host in this way, and that you are only doing so now because of your condition. Well, well, I am doing my best. The car will be ready directly, and meanwhile you shall have a drink —I insist on that—and you shall telephone. If I suggested for a moment that I had not a telephone——"

"Good God!" thought Sir Julius. "The man's a brook!"

"—that was merely because I, also, suffer from my nerves sometimes—particularly when people come flying down hills and nearly break their necks outside my house—and when I am irritable I dislike having things taken for granted. If the world was to know that I had a telephone, a public telephone, that anybody could use, I would have the usual sign put out—'You can telephone from here.'"

Sir Julius realised that there was only one way to deal with such a man as this. To argue with him was impossible. To submit to his peculiarities was the sole course to pursue. He decided to accept the drink. He would even have his temperature taken, if the doctor wanted it! And when the doctor's folly had spent itself, he would perhaps be allowed to telephone, and to get away.

While Sir Julius was not as ill as Dr. Glade chose to assume, he was far from well, and it was largely his weary condition that made him yield his will temporarily to the doctor's. Without further protest, he watched Dr. Glade open a cupboard and take out a decanter and two glasses.

"We will drink together," announced the old man portentously. "We will forget our hasty words, eh? Too bad, too bad. The world is full of trouble. Why should we add to it by our hasty tempers." He handed Sir Julius a glass, and drained his own. "Aha! Already I see our folly. My folly, if you like. What does it matter? Yes, I, too, was in need of that little dose. I have been working hard lately—doing nothing! I apologise. And, when your own little dose begins to warm you, you also will apologise. Life is like that. Action and reaction. But I will not listen—no, the fault was mine. Come, let us ascend to the telephone!"

He spoke as though he were about to introduce his guest to the Emperor of Japan. He was absurd. But Sir Julius bore with him. The "little dose" had certainly warmed him, and outside he could hear the doctor's car purring.

"The telephone is upstairs?" asked Sir Julius.

"Yes, in my bedroom," answered Dr. Glade. "I keep it there in case of sudden night calls. You understand? Someone is ill. Ah, ring up Dr. Glade! It does not matter if he is asleep. *He* does not matter. He must answer the telephone—straight out of a dream, eh?—and go to the person who is ill, and cure him if he is in a good temper, or kill him if he is not, so he can get more sleep the next night, eh? Well, well, who would be a doctor!"

They ascended two flights of stairs.

"You don't get much light here," said Sir Julius.

"The trees—the leaves—they are a nuisance," answered Dr. Glade. "This is the room." He threw a door open. "The telephone is on the opposite wall."

Sir Julius entered. The door slammed behind him, and a key was turned.

CHAPTER XV

WAITING

"SIR JULIUS is late," said Peter.

"Yes, isn't he?" answered Angela.

They spoke casually, endeavouring by their lightness to deny any significance to their words; but they did not deceive each other. Down below, the hall clock had just struck half-past one. Sir Julius had been gone an hour.

It had been a strange hour, an hour of interlude. Compared with the hour that had preceded it, it had been barren of events, and at first a sense of relief had pervaded them. Seated in Angela's pleasant sitting-room, to which they had returned when Sir Julius had departed, and which Peter now regarded as his temporary home, they had ignored gloomy subjects, and had chatted about their work and Art. The oppressive things around them had melted into sweeter thoughts. But as the minutes ticked by, their restlessness began to return, and the happy thoughts became harder to grip on to.

"You ought to get into the Academy next year," said Peter, listening for footsteps.

"Nonsense, I'm not half good enough," replied Angela, staring out of the window for signs of a returning car. "Did you ever finish that picture of Hindhead?"

Instead of telling her that he had finished it, hated it, and destroyed it, he observed,

"You know the doctor may have been out. Perhaps he's had to wait."

"I dare say that's it," agreed Angela, unconvincingly.

Peter emitted a glum laugh.

"We're not much good at acting, are we?" he observed. "I remember, when I was a youngster, I used to talk about cricket averages hard, just before going to the dentist. We're both of us worried, and I suppose we may as well admit it."

"Will the admission help?" she queried, with a sigh.

"Yes. Between others it mightn't, but between us, it will. I don't see any object in keeping our thoughts from each other. I say, Angela—doesn't it seem odd, my wearing these beautiful white flannel trousers? They don't seem to fit the occasion, exactly. Lord, how I'd love a game of tennis! And *wouldn't* the inspector's face be an interesting study if you and I marched out at this moment with a couple of rackets!"

"Listen!" cried the girl, jumping up, and running to the window.

"What is it?" exclaimed Peter, following suit.

"False alarm," she reported, disappointedly. "I thought I heard his footsteps. But it's only one of those beastly policemen."

Peter shook his head reprovingly.

"Angela," he admonished, "you're getting jumpy!"

"Well," she retorted, "I have every excuse for getting jumpy!"

"You have *no* excuse for imagining that you could recognise Sir Julius's footsteps on the gravel below," he pointed out. "And, anyway, we'll hear the car returning before we hear the footsteps, remember. Now, let's be sensible! Four miles to the doctor's house—say, fifteen minutes——"

"What? Sixteen miles an hour with no traffic?" interrupted Angela. "No one could go as slowly! Even ten minutes would only mean twenty-four miles an hour."

"Very well, then. Ten minutes. Ten minutes there, and ten minutes back——"

"Would leave forty minutes in which to deliver an urgent message! I love your efforts to cheer me up, Peter, but I don't think the ostrich is sensible when it buries its head in the sand because it's afraid to look at its pursuers. Sir Julius *ought* to be back by now, and it's no good blinking the fact."

"Well, we won't blink it, then," responded Peter, soberly. "I agree with you. Shall we try and get into touch with Druce?"

"Let's wait just five more minutes," suggested Angela. "Then, perhaps . . ."

The five minutes went by. There was no sign of Sir Julius.

"Peter!" exclaimed Angela, suddenly.

"Well?" he answered.

"Suppose—he doesn't come back—*really?*"

"Yes—I'm supposing it."

"Do you know what that will mean?"

"What will it mean?"

"It will mean—another disappearance! It will mean, Peter, that there will only be two of us left!"

"Nonsense, old girl," he parried, though her words chilled him. "There's loads of us left!"

"Only two, Peter—in the sense I mean," she replied. "Just you and me. It's—it's rather awful, isn't it?"

"I think it's rather jolly," he answered. "Just you and me, Angela. I can't help liking the sound of it."

"Be serious, please!"

"Good Lord, I'm serious enough," he exclaimed. "Only . . . don't you see . . ." He paused, and suddenly stretched out his hand. "Grip hold, Angela. Do you feel me?"

"Yes," she murmured, as she slipped her hand into his.

"Good. Well, I'll make you a promise. *I* won't dissolve into nothingness. I'm going to stick by you. I expect I'm as

keen to solve this mystery as anyone—to find out what's happened to Mr. Elderly, where the butler's disappeared to, who killed the policeman, and all the rest of it. But I'm not going to follow my bump of idle curiosity. There are plenty of people trying to answer those questions, and that leaves me only one thing to think about—or to care about. And that's just *you,* my dear. There's nothing else in the world that counts for me." He pressed her hand hard. "There—is *that* serious enough for you?"

"Dear old Peter," she whispered.

It was all she could say at the moment. Returning his pressure, she gently disengaged her hand, and went to the window again. Her back was to him, but he knew there were tears in her eyes.

"What a damn shame this is!" he thought fiercely. "If I let any harm come to a hair of her head, may I burn for ever more!"

Someone knocked on the door. Peter opened it, and found the housekeeper standing in the hall.

"Are we to wait any longer for lunch?" enquired Mrs. Catesby.

"I vote we have it," said Peter, turning to Angela. "Seems to me we all need stoking." Angela nodded, and he turned back to Mrs. Catesby. "Where do we have it?" he asked. "In a ring of constables?"

"It is laid in the small sitting-room downstairs," replied Mrs. Catesby, without even the flicker of a smile. "It will be served in five minutes."

"Splendid. Does the police station eat with us?"

"I have laid for six."

"The six being?"

"That's more than I can say," replied Mrs. Catesby; and then, after a moment's hesitation, asked a question herself. "Has Sir Julius returned yet?"

"I believe not," answered Peter. "He'll probably turn up in the middle of the meal."

"I'm sure I hope so," said Mrs. Catesby; and departed.

Peter closed the door, and joined Angela at the window.

"One thing is evident, Angela," he remarked. "Mrs. Catesby is scared stiff."

"Do you think so?" asked Angela. "She seems to me a most emotionless creature."

"I was watching her just now. She controls herself well, but at one instant—when she was asking about Sir Julius—there was real terror in her eye. Now, why should Mrs. Catesby be terrified over the upshot of a visit to a doctor's whose name and address she herself supplied? Oh, hang it!" he broke off, abruptly. "I'm getting morbid!"

"*You* need stoking, too," smiled Angela. "Let's be getting down."

"Righto," he replied "Full steam ahead for the filleted plaice!"

They descended to the lower hall, and made their way towards the little sitting-room in which luncheon was to be served. This room, Angela said, was usually known as the study, on account of the fact that Mr. Elderly had always kept many reference books there, and used to work there occasionally when he wanted a change of scene. It was almost opposite the dining-room, in the East Wing, and neither Angela nor Peter had any theory to offer why the room had been chosen for the mid-day meal.

"Unless," suggested Angela, "its small size makes it easier to keep us under observation."

"Well, that's an idea," replied Peter. "It wouldn't surprise me."

About to enter the study, Peter paused.

"Do you mind if I just pop along to the library for a moment?" he asked Angela. "Lunch can't be ready just yet, and

I'd rather like to know how Druce is getting along. And we were going to consult him about Sir Julius, you know."

"I'll come with you," said Angela. "That's my only stipulation."

He knew it would be useless to argue, so they turned and retraced their way to the lounge hall, beyond which was the passage to the library. Reaching the library door, they stopped and listened.

"Can't hear anyone inside," whisperd Peter.

"Nor can I," answered Angela. "But I suppose we'd better knock."

"Oh, by all means," replied Peter. "Toujours la politesse!"

He rapped softly with his knuckles. There was no response. He rapped again. "No one shall say we didn't ask," he murmured. Then, as again no invitation came from within, he softly turned the handle, and opened the door.

At first, they thought the room was empty, and Peter was about to close the door again; but, all at once, he gave a little start. A huddled figure was seated in an armchair.

"Good Lord!" muttered Peter. "You'd better go away, Angela."

"Peter, will you *never* learn?" she whispered back.

But her fingers, as they clasped his sleeves, trembled.

They advanced towards the figure. It was the figure of George Geary, the workman. His arms hung limp, and his head drooped forward.

"Is he dead?" gasped Angela.

The figure answered for itself by raising its head slowly and opening an eye.

"What's up? What are you doing here?" demanded Peter, sternly.

For it was quite obvious that George Geary was not dead, and Peter was not in a sympathetic mood.

"Doin' 'ere?" queried Geary, glassily, "Why—so I am!"

His voice was thick, and his condition was palpable. An empty bottle by his side would have told his story, even if his voice had not.

"He's drunk," said Peter, disgustedly.

"Do you blame him?" retorted Angela. "The poor fellow's had a rough time——"

"Tha's right, miss—a very rough time," agreed the object of her charity. "Never come to this place again—no! Never try to get work again. They chase you—orl over the bloomin' place. On'y one thing to do—try and forget." He smiled benignly, and dropped his head again.

"You can't stay here," exclaimed Peter, definitely. "Come along! Stir yourself."

"Wha's that?" asked Geary, from the depths.

"Well, I'm not going to haul him about," muttered Peter. "We'll have to report this to Druce, that's all. I expect he'd spotted where the drink was when he first came to this room, and that's probably what he was after when Sir Julius and I found him here later on. I wonder how he got away from the police again? He seems extraordinarily slippy. Poor devil!"

"Let's go," shuddered Angela. "This room gives me the creeps."

Peter nodded, and they turned.

"Sh—half-a-second," warned Peter suddenly, in a low voice. "Someone's coming along the passage."

Caution had become second nature to them now, and they drew aside instinctively, to be out of the immediate view of anyone entering the room. The footsteps drew nearer, then halted, then came on again. Someone stood in the doorway.

Suddenly, Peter stepped forward.

"Good God!" he exclaimed. "Miss Ayrton!"

CHAPTER XVI

PETER SPEAKS OUT

PETER and Angela were not the only inmates of the library to betray surprise at Miss Ayrton's appearance. The workman raised his head on hearing Peter's exclamation, and stared with frank astonishment. His glazed eyes became momentarily animated; his drunken stupor had been pierced by this sudden, unexpected apparition.

For a second or two, Miss Ayrton remained in the doorway. She looked faint and dazed, but her cheeks, although still pale, now bore faint traces of colour. Then she swayed slightly, and gripped the door-knob for support.

"Miss Ayrton—you're ill!" cried Angela, springing forward. "Don't you think you ought to be back in bed?"

"No—I'm not ill," replied Miss Ayrton, in a low voice. "Not really ill—I just came down—to——"

"Peter! Quick!" exclaimed Angela. "She's fainting!"

He caught her as she grew limp, and lowered her gently to a chair. In doing so, he caught sight of Geary. Geary's head had drooped forward again against his chest.

"What a cheery roomful of people!" muttered Peter. "We'd better call someone."

"Who?" asked Angela.

That, certainly, was beyond Peter's ability to decide. A decision was not necessary, however, for hurrying footsteps announced the approach of others.

"There she is!" cried the voice of Mrs. Catesby.

"How did she manage it?" replied the voice of Druce.

"I must have forgotten to lock the door when I came down to lunch——"

The voices stopped abruptly as the speakers came into view. Druce glanced swiftly round the room, then turned to the housekeeper.

"Is it necessary to lock the door?" he demanded.

"Surely this proves it?" retorted the housekeeper. "The girl's delirious!"

Miss Ayrton opened her eyes, and raised her head.

"I'm not delirious," she murmured, weakly. "If only you'd all let me alone—I'd be all right then."

"You'll be all right, Miss Ayrton, if you just go back to bed and get a little more sleep," suggested the detective.

Miss Ayrton turned her eyes upon him, and regarded him fixedly for a few seconds.

"Who are you?" she asked.

"My name is Druce, and I am engaged on this case," answered the detective, quietly. "Be advised by me. Go back to bed. In a short while, you will feel better, and we can talk."

"Why not talk now?" demanded the secretary.

"Certainly—if you are in a condition to talk," responded Druce. "But—do you think you are?"

"*I* don't think she is," interposed Angela. "Why not let her get back to her room, and rest?"

"Yes, to *my* room!" cried Miss Ayrton, with sudden vehemence. "Not hers!"

She looked at Mrs. Catesby, and Mrs. Catesby shrugged her shoulders.

"It is obvious to anyone that Miss Ayrton needs careful attention," the housekeeper remarked, coldly, "but I am the last person to force my services upon anyone."

The workman opened an eye, and chimed in.

"Tha's right," he nodded, vapidly. "Force is no good—

no good at all. Just take it quietly, and everything's all right. You drift right off."

"How did *he* come here?" demanded Druce.

"Ah, *I'd* like to know that, too!" cried a voice from the passage. Inspector Biggs lumbered into view. "If ever there was a slippery customer, he's it!"

"Drink is a great lure," commented Druce, glancing at the tipsy fellow thoughtfully. "The craze for it sharpens the wits —till the satisfaction of the craze takes the wits away. Cart him off somewhere, Biggs. We don't want him here."

"Think I don't know that?" snapped Biggs.

"And take my advice," went on the detective, unperturbed by the inspector's ill humour, "and tie him up properly this time. I'm inclined to think you'd be justified in fixing on the bracelets."

"There—listen to 'em!" cried Geary, suddenly trying to assert himself. "It's the bloomin' bracelets now! Why not f'nish it off, and—f'nish it off? Build scaffold in the garden, and 'ang me. And then 'ang all the other million who're lookin' f'r a job like me!"

"Be quiet!" ordered the inspector.

"Well, ain't I tellin' yer 'ow ter make me quiet?" retorted Geary. "'Ang me! And then 'ang yerself!"

The inspector advanced with an angry exclamation, but Geary gave no more trouble. He allowed himself to be pulled up and marched off; but at the door, he paused and winked at Miss Ayrton.

"If your 'ead's anything like mine, miss, I'm sorry for yer," he said, thickly. "Jest lie down an' try an' fergit it—tha's what *I'm* goin' ter do." He spat, to prove his independence. "Fergit it."

"Out of the mouths of babes and topers," said the detective to Miss Ayrton, when Geary had been lead off. "How about taking the fellow's advice?"

Miss Ayrton rose. She had sat, dazed and silent, during Geary's little outburst. Now, abruptly, she left the room, looking neither to right nor left.

"I think you'd better go after her, eh?" Peter whispered to Angela.

Angela nodded, and ran out quickly.

"I'll go, too," observed Mrs. Catesby. "She's a handful."

"She *would* go, too!" thought Peter, disgustedly.

But he did not attempt to detain her, and when Druce and he were alone, he closed the door.

"Look here, Mr. Druce," he said, bluntly. "This isn't good enough."

"I agree," answered Druce. "It's very far from good enough."

"Yes, but it's a little farther away than even *you* think," retorted Peter. "Do you realize what a tremendous advantage you have over me?"

Druce shook his head. "I don't quite see your point," he replied. "Do you mean that my responsibility gives me an advantage?"

"It gives you freedom of action, anyway," exclaimed Peter. "*That's* what I meant when I said it wasn't good enough. I tell you, I'm not *made* for sitting down and watching—and if you've got a professional interest in setting things right, I've got a personal one." Druce smiled faintly, but said nothing. "Suppose—just for the sake of argument—I snapped my fingers in everybody's face, and went my own way? What would you do?"

"That's rather an ambiguous question, Mr. Armstrong," returned the detective. "What *would* be your own way?"

"I hardly know yet—I've had so little experience during the last few hours," said Peter, ironically. "My initiative has become a little dulled under the hammering of Inspector Biggs. But, by Jove, I'd do *something*—you can bet your life

on that. And I wouldn't wait long, either, before I found out what that something was."

Druce frowned, and shook his head.

"I wonder if you realize, Mr. Armstrong," he answered, slowly, "how really delicate the position is? For the moment, it's mainly manœuvring—finding out what the pieces are, and what they represent. Of course," he went on, and now the irony was on his side, "you may be cleverer at this game than I am. Amateurs sometimes beat professionals—especially, I understand, in plays and detective novels. You may be quicker——"

"Oh, shut up," muttered Peter.

"—or a greater student of psychology. Well, I'll risk placing myself at a disadvantage by admitting to you that, up to the present, there are only two people in this house whose point of view I feel certain I understand. They are yourself and Miss Vernon."

"Well, we're quits there," replied Peter. "Miss Vernon and I have just as limited knowledge. I suppose," he added, curiously, "you know the importance of your admission—of what you've just said?"

"Of course, I know its importance," responded the detective, gravely. "It isn't my habit to make thoughtless remarks."

"No—I shouldn't judge that it was. But—it means—that we may be in for a hell of a time, before long, eh?"

"I think it very probable that we shall be in for a hell of a time before long."

"To-night, perhaps?"

"Quite possibly."

"I should say, quite probably. Unless, that is, we do something drastic before night falls."

"Such as?" queried the detective.

There was just a glint of amusement in his eyes, which,

happily for his pride, the younger man did not see. But Detective Druce was not under-rating the seriousness of Peter's mood, or the dormant vigour that lay at the bottom of it.

"God knows!" muttered Peter. "But that, I take it, is our job to find out. What are *you* doing?"

He shot out the question suddenly. Inspector Biggs would have turned red with anger, had the question been shot at him, but the only outward effect it produced upon the detective was to kill the amusement in his eyes.

"I am doing all I can do, without disturbing the hare—or the hares—I am after," he said, quietly. "An unwise act—a situation produced by impatience—might mean—" He shrugged his shoulders.

"Say it," urged Peter.

"There's no need to say it," answered Druce. "Mr. Elderly has disappeared. So has Davis, the butler. And a constable has been killed."

"Then I'll say it," retorted Peter. "You mean that an unwise act means death?" Druce inclined his head. "I agree. Death to me, or to you—or to anybody else." He turned away abruptly for a moment, and gritted his teeth. Things were happening to Peter. When he turned back again, he went on quietly, "But delay may mean death, too, Mr. Druce. That's what worries me. The longer we delay, the more time we give to others to mature their plans—whatever their diabolical plans may be. You know—it's obvious, isn't it?—this thing isn't just a little incident. It's—*big!*"

"I had already come to that conclusion," nodded Druce.

"Too big, perhaps, for just us three to handle alone, eh?"

He spoke casually, but he watched the detective at that moment for all he was worth. It was the effect of the expression, "us three," that he wanted to tap. Druce's face remained impassive.

"You count everybody else as an enemy?" the detective asked.

"You almost made that admission yourself, just now," Peter reminded him. "Tell me one thing, anyway. Do you count Inspector Biggs as an enemy?"

"I am certainly suspicious of Biggs," replied Druce, dryly.

"Good! So am I. And what about our friend Geary? The workman johnnie?"

Druce was not quite so ready with his answer this time, but, when it came, it was arresting.

"I think," said Druce, "that it might be in the interests of Inspector Biggs to have a suspicious character like Geary hanging around. That might explain—if there is anything at all in our hypothesis, which there may not be—why the inspector brought Geary along when meeting him in the road, and why Geary has been allowed rather a free hand, considering all things, to roam around."

"By Jove—that's a neat notion!" exclaimed Peter.

"Don't bank on it, Mr. Armstrong. I hesitate to advance theories to others, preferring to keep them to myself. Still, that thought should give you something to bite on. And if there *is* anything in the idea, and the inspector isn't playing straight with us—well, he has the advantage of numbers behind him, if we don't walk warily."

Peter nodded.

"I agree to that, of course. I'm not quite a bull in a China shop," he said. "All the same—and you may as well have it, Mr. Druce—I'm not going to stand still any longer. I'd like to see *where* you're walking!"

"Very well—I'll show you. In part, anyway. Frankly, I'm not happy to leave this house, now I am here and have seen the position. It is necessary for the safety of certain people that I remain, and that, while I remain, I do not

raise the enemy's suspicions. But I quite agree with you about the possible inferiority of our numbers. If the inspector—and his associates—are playing crooked, we'll need reinforcing. I gave Sir Julius Hughes instructions to telephone to Scotland Yard from Dr. Glade's house, and when the message gets through—well, we shall no longer be in a minority——"

"Yes, but *will* the message get through?" exclaimed Peter. "Do you know the time? It's two o'clock—and Sir Julius has now been gone an hour and a half!"

"That is one reason," said the detective, moving towards the door, "why I do not want to prolong this conversation. Sir Julius has been gone much too long—*and I am going after him!*"

CHAPTER XVII

THE PRISONERS REBEL

LUNCH—an hour late—was not a comfortable meal. When Peter entered the little study, he found Angela and the housekeeper already seated, and neither of them in a very talkative mood. Alice, the parlourmaid, served them sullenly, and Peter noticed that her usually steady hand trembled.

"Sorry I'm late," said Peter, as he sat down.

"Where have you been?" asked Angela.

"Oh, having a jaw with the old detective. Is Miss Ayrton back in her room?"

Angela nodded. Mrs. Catesby made no comment. Peter turned to her.

"Your party of six has dwindled down to three," he remarked.

"One always lays for the Professor—" that was Mr. Grinton "—whether he comes in or not," replied Mrs. Catesby, unemotionally. "I laid, too, for Sir Julius, naturally. And I thought Mr. Druce might join us."

"Well, half's not so bad, these lean times," answered Peter, "and Sir Julius may be back to lunch yet."

Angela glanced at him quickly, and he shook his head. After a short silence, Mrs. Catesby enquired,

"What is Mr. Druce doing now, Mr. Armstrong? Do you know?"

"Oh, he's mouching around still, I believe," answered

Peter, not in a mood to give away information gratis. "I expect detectives get used to missing their meals."

"Would he like me to save anything for him, do you think?" persisted Mrs. Catesby.

"Subtle one," thought Peter, as he responded, "I'm sure I don't know. But I don't think I'd put myself out, if I were you—eh, Angela? He's probably got some tabloid meals in his pocket. But what about Miss Ayrton? Is she having something sent up to her?"

"She didn't want anything," said Angela. "I think she's in the mood when you wait for tea."

"Ah, tea," murmured Peter. "Jolly meal, tea!"

"I'm sure I hope ours will be," observed Mrs. Catesby, acidly.

Her acidity caused another pause. Peter broke it again by asking,

"By the way, Mrs. Catesby, what sort of a man is this Dr. Glade? Pretty good, eh?"

"No, pretty bad, I should say," responded the depressing housekeeper.

"Then why on earth—" began Peter.

"You can't be a chooser when you live buried in the country," said Mrs. Catesby. "He was the nearest doctor. It wasn't my wish to send for him, anyway—it was the detective's."

"True," murmured Peter. "I wonder when Sir Julius will get back?"

He glanced at the housekeeper out of the corner of his eye. Her expression was inscrutable.

"Have you any idea why he's so long?" Angela backed Peter up.

"I've no idea at all," responded Mrs. Catesby. "He ought to have been back an hour ago."

"I hope he's not had an accident," said Peter, still watching the housekeeper for signs.

"It wouldn't surprise me," returned Mrs. Catesby. "There's a nasty hill by the doctor's house. Have you finished, Miss Vernon? Can I ring?"

The second course appeared, and was eaten in practical silence. Mrs. Catesby seemed to have decided on a policy of monosyllables, and Peter's mind was busy with a daring scheme. He longed now to get the meal over, and to speak with Angela alone; and he refused a second helping of apple-tart to expedite matters. At half-past two, they rose from the table, and Peter suggested a cigarette in Angela's room. She agreed with avidity, being quite as anxious to remove herself from the depressing company of Mrs. Catesby as was Peter himself, and when they reached her sitting-room, she sank down on the settee with a sigh.

"Oh, Peter!" she exclaimed. "I think I should go mad if you weren't here!"

"I know I should go stark potty, if *you* weren't," he replied, "although—as a matter of fact——"

He stopped abruptly.

"What is it?" she asked. "No secrets!"

"No—I couldn't keep this a secret," he answered, smiling. "I was going to say, Angela, that—as a matter of fact—I propose to take you away this afternoon."

"Take me away?" she exclaimed, and stared at him in astonishment.

"Don't look so surprised," said Peter. "After all, isn't that the only sensible thing to do? It's not safe in this place——"

"But, Peter," she interrupted, "how *can* you take me away? You know, it's impossible!"

"Nothing's impossible, until you've proved it so," he retorted. "I'm not saying it'll be easy. But—I've been thinking hard since my last conversation with the detective—and I was thinking all through lunch—it's worth the attempt."

"Suppose we fail?" she asked.

"Shall we be any worse off than we are now?" he parried.

"We might be much worse off."

"In that case, we *mustn't* fail!"

"Well, then—what would *you* do?"

"I—I don't quite know, yet."

"If you mean you have any idea of removing me to safety, and then returning to danger yourself, dismiss the idea, my dear young man," she remarked definitely. "You know, sometimes I think you don't understand women at all."

"I'm serious, Angela——"

"And so am I, Peter. And—even if you were to promise to stay away with me—I'm not sure that I would agree."

"Why not?" he demanded, although he guessed her reason before she gave it to him.

"Peter, you're a guest in this house—a very dear guest, but a guest, just the same," she explained. "But I'm—in a sense—a part of it. I mean, it's *my* uncle who has disappeared, and—and if anything has happened to him, this house may belong to me. I want to leave—I do really, Peter. But, somehow, I just couldn't!"

He did not argue with her.

"Yes, I understand, old thing—you'd feel like running away?" he answered. "Well, of course—that's what it would be. But you'd have a damned fine excuse. However, I can see from your expression that that's that, and I can't say I'm surprised that you haven't cottoned to my idea. All right, then. I've got another—and this time I hope you *will* agree."

"You're full of ideas," she smiled.

"Yes, the little brain has begun to work," admitted Peter. "There's going to be no more nonsense. If we stay, we're going to make a fight of it—I mean, we're going to stay to some purpose, and we're not going to just sit down and

watch it happen. You don't know, do you, that Druce has gone off to Dr. Glade's house?"

"No, has he?" she exclaimed.

"Yes. I didn't mention it downstairs because—p'r'aps I'm silly—I don't feel inclined to give Mrs. Catesby any gratuitous information. Let her find out things for herself, eh? Well, he's gone, but I imagine a bit of his influence is remaining behind. I'm going to explore the grounds—now, this minute—and if I'm asked any questions, I'll say old Druce has given me permission. Only," he added, with a grin, "I don't mean to be asked any questions."

"Go on," said Angela, rather breathlessly. "How are you going to manage it? *Did* Druce give you permission?"

Tempted to lie, Peter told the truth.

"Strictly speaking, Angela, he didn't. But he's been pretty confidential, and, if I'm careful and reasonably discreet, I don't think I'll get into any hot water with him. Anyhow, that's got to be chanced."

Angela was silent for awhile. She regarded Peter thoughtfully. Then she said,

"And I'm to wait here till you return?"

"Of course——"

"No, not 'of course.' I'm going with you. I'm quite a match for you when it comes to insanity." She laughed at his dawning protest. "Besides, Peter, I can help your scheme already by giving you some useful information. If we start now, the coast ought to be fairly clear."

"By Jove, how do you know that?" exclaimed Peter.

"Before you came into the study, Mrs. Catesby gave an order for lunch for the inspector and all his little constables. The time fixed was half-past two. Even policemen love their little tummies, and I think we ought to have at least half-an hour."

"Splendid!" cried Peter. "Let's start at once, then! There's no time like the present."

"I'll just get my hat," she answered.

She slipped into her bedroom, and reappeared a moment later with a small straw hat concealing her shingled hair; which, although the hat was an attractive one, Peter considered a pity.

They left the room like truant children. As they reached the door of Miss Ayrton's room, they stopped and listened.

"Here's another reason why I wouldn't be happy running away," whispered Angela.

"True," Peter whispered back.

"I think I'll just peep in," murmured Angela, but she paused suddenly, with her hand on the door-knob. Somebody was moving within, and the heaviness of the tread suggested that it was not Miss Ayrton.

"Sounds like Mrs. Catesby," muttered Peter. "I vote we *don't* peep in!"

Reluctantly, Angela released the door-knob, and they resumed their way.

The house was silent, and seemed deserted. No one met them in the hall. They reached the front-door without being challenged. Outside in the porch, with the front-door softly closed behind them, they paused. They were in their last shelter, before venturing out into the open.

"Remember the last time we went out together?" whispered Peter.

"We were going for a walk," answered Angela, with a faint smile. "How funny it seems!"

"I wonder whether it would have altered things at all if we had taken that walk?" mused the young man. "I was all for it, you know—it was you who were afraid!"

"Well, I'm not afraid this time," she retorted. "Just think, Peter—it was only four hours ago!"

"Seems more like four days!" he grunted. "Now then—over the top!"

Their feet seemed to make a deafening noise as they left the stone floor of the porch and took to the gravel. They crunched quickly by the flower-borders till they reached the blessedly silent lawn that ran past the dining-room. Suddenly, Angela paused.

"They'll be having their meal there!" she whispered. "We can't go this way!"

"Hang!" muttered Peter. "I *want* to go this way!"

And then, all at once, he chuckled.

"Wait here for a minute," he said. "Stick by this bush. I sha'n't be a jiffy. And, when you hear a noise, dive past the French windows, and make for the drive. I'll be after you."

"What are you going to do?" she asked.

But he was gone.

It was a mad impulse, but for the life of him he could not resist it. Hang it! All these confounded people had filled his life with mysteries. He'd give them one himself to cogitate over. Slipping back to the porch, he re-entered the lounge-hall, and glanced rapidly around.

A stick stood in the stand.

"That'll do," he grinned.

Seizing it, he crept round to the door of the dining-room. Then, after listening for a second, and satisfying himself that the room was full of hungry policemen, he suddenly raised the stick and smote the door hard.

He did not stop to hear the exclamations from within, but he knew that all eyes were now being turned towards the door, and that no one would worry for several seconds about the French window. He was back in the lounge-hall in a flash, and out in the grounds again before the first astonished constable had reached the dining-room door to investigate the unaccountable sound.

Ahead of him, flashing by the French window, was a hurrying figure. "Well done, Angela!" he chuckled. "Got a bit of our own back, at last!"

And he sped gleefully in the direction of the drive.

CHAPTER XVIII

A GARDENER AND SOME DISCOVERIES

KEEPING well within the shadows of the thickly-growing trees, Peter and Angela made their way cautiously along the drive, but a disappointment greeted them when they wound round the final bend and came in view of the gate. Constable Dawkins, munching bread and cheese, was still on guard.

"Dashed nuisance!" muttered Peter, and wondered whether to show himself boldly, or to try and give him the slip.

While they were hesitating, protected from immediate discovery by an accommodating bush, a figure came out of the lodge, and addressed the constable. It was the ill-visaged gardener with the sandy hair and the scar.

" 'Ow yer gettin' on?" asked the gardener.

"Bit dry," replied the constable.

"Come in, and 'ave one," suggested the gardener.

"No, you bring one out," retorted the constable. "I'm on duty, I am, and don't you forget it."

The gardener disappeared, and Peter whispered,

"I've seen that fellow before. Do you know anything about him?"

"Only his name, and that he's one of the under-gardeners," Angela whispered back.

"Your uncle seems to have had a weakness for gardeners," murmured Peter. "And also for ugly ones. What's the chap's name?"

"Last. He's not been here very long. He—sh! He's coming back!"

The gardener reappeared, with a glass in his hand. Constable Dawkins advanced to meet him, and took the glass with obvious satisfaction.

"Ah, so we get *something* for our trouble," he observed, with a wink. "Well, 'ere's 'ow, and many of 'em." He drained the glass, watched rather furtively by Last, and handed it back. "Wouldn't mind another," he remarked.

"Take my tip, and go slow," replied Last. "We'll want clear 'eads to-night, that's a fack."

"Ay, there won't be much sleep for any of us to-night," nodded Dawkins, and took out a cigarette. He regarded the cigarette pensively, decided at last to smoke it, and stuck it in his mouth. "Got a match," he asked.

"Yes, a good 'un," answered Last. "It'll light two."

Dawkins laughed, and reopened his shabby case. The gardener took a cigarette with a grunt, and soon they were both puffing.

"Wot time's the show begin?" enquired Last, after a silence.

"Can't say yet," replied the constable. "It all depends."

"What on?"

"'Ow things go."

"On 'ow what things go?"

"There you are," said Dawkins.

"No, I ain't," said Last. "And that's the trouble. We're kep' too much in the dark." He spat. "You say, 'On 'ow things go,' but you don't know no more'n I do."

"Don't I?" retorted the constable. "Well, p'r'aps I'm better at guessin'."

"Better at gassin', yer mean."

"No, guessin', my lad, not gassin'. Would you like to 'ear my guess, now?"

"Go on."

"The time we start depends upon the time certain people go to sleep."

"Ah," murmured Last, reflectively. "And s'pose they don't go to sleep at all?"

"Well, in that case," observed the constable, "a little bit of 'elp mightn't do 'em any 'arm."

"I'd put 'em to sleep, fer the price of a drink," said Last, after a pause.

"You'll do nothing you ain't told to do," said the constable. "That is, unless you'd like to be put to sleep yourself?"

"Shut up," snapped the gardener, nervily. "P'r'aps *you'll* be put to sleep, afore you knows it. Like Phelps was."

Constable Dawkins was a fairly phlegmatic individual, and his portly frame suggested serenity, but the gardener's last remark disturbed his composure a little. His voice, when he next spoke, was not quite as smooth and confident as it had been.

"That was a bad business, that was," he muttered. "I'd like to know 'oo did for Phelps."

"What price Quinn?" suggested the gardener.

"Go on!" exclaimed the constable, his eyes growing.

"You never thought o' that, did you?" sneered the gardener. "P'r'aps you ain't the on'y one as is good at guessin'!"

"Quinn," repeated the constable, frowning. "What'd 'e do that for?"

"Quinn'd do anything, if 'e wanted to," retorted the gardener."

But the constable shook his head.

"You're talkin' through your 'at, my lad," he said. "It's a bad guess, that is. You might be nearer the mark if you was to say Mr. Armstrong, now. Ah—you never thought of *that!*"

Peter turned his head, and glanced at Angela. Her face was pale, and she was holding his arm rather tightly.

"Mr. Armstrong," said the gardener, slowly. It was clear, he had not thought of it. "Well, why don't they clear *'im* out?"

"One at a time, my lad—one at a time," answered Constable Dawkins. "If Mr. Armstrong makes trouble, 'e'll be cleared out, don't *you* worry."

"And then, there's the girl," Last went on. "What about 'er?"

"Come now, my lad—gentle with the ladies," reproved the constable, sarcastically, and added a coarse jest.

If Peter had possessed less self-control, the whole course of events would have been altered by the constable's coarseness, and he would probably not have participated in the amazing night that was to come. Even as it was, he needed Angela's restraining pressure to prevent him from springing out of his concealment and seizing the policeman's throat. The conversation was interrupted from another source, however. An approaching car sounded in the lane, and a few moments later, the car came to a halt outside the gate. Its occupants were Detective Druce and a silver-haired old man.

Constable Dawkins, with a warning glance at Last, sprang to attention, and opened the gate. The car passed through, and then stopped again. The detective addressed the constable.

"Anything to report?" he asked, briskly.

"Nothing, sir," answered Dawkins, in business-like tones. "Everything's quiet."

"I'm not sure that I agree with your definition of quietude," commented Druce; and added sharply, as his eyes fell upon the gardener, "Well—what are *you* doing?"

"Givin' the constable 'is lunch," replied the gardener. "Inspector's orders."

"Such obedience—such discipline," murmured the silver-haired man, with a twinkle. "It quite inspires one, does it not?"

He let the clutch in as he spoke, and the car resumed its way.

"I wouldn't shed no tears if I wrung the neck o' that feller one day," grunted the gardener, when the car had disappeared.

"What—the doctor?" asked Dawkins.

"No, the other feller," said Last. "Well, I ain't goin' to stand out 'ere no more. Wot about comin' in fer another?"

"Well, just a quick one," yielded Dawkins.

They went into the cottage, and their voices were heard no more. Peter discovered that Angela was trembling.

"Want to go back?" he whispered.

"No, not for anything," she gasped. "Oh—the beasts!"

"Yes. They'll pay for it presently—I swear that! What do you want to do?"

"Whatever you want to do, Peter. We mustn't be separated, you and I—must we?"

"Rather not," he replied, squeezing her arm. "But, if you want to go back to your room, I'll go with you, of course."

She hesitated.

"I—I think we ought to stay out here for a little," she said. "We might find out some more things."

Peter nodded gravely.

"We might. But we've found out a pretty good deal, as it is." He looked towards the gate. "Or what about making a dash for it? The coast's clear, for a moment."

"Peter, don't tempt me, dear. I *won't* be a coward, and you sha'n't make me. I don't want to go till I've found out what they've done to my uncle. And, besides, we couldn't leave Miss Ayrton and the detective behind, could we?"

"I'm not sure that we're much use to them," said Peter, rather bitterly.

"The more we find out, the more use we can be," she replied. "Let's go on. I don't want to turn back. I'm game."

"The gamest I ever met," he exclaimed. "Come along, then. Follow me quickly, and don't talk till I tell you to."

After a hurried glance at the cottage, he slipped across the drive and made for the boundary wall. The structure was well adapted for their purpose. Encircling the entire estate, it was some eight feet high, and for most of its length trees grew almost up to it, but not quite. The trees formed, roughly, an inner ring, and there was just room to creep round between the inner ring of foliage and the outer ring of brick.

It was quite the queerest journey either of them had ever taken. They hardly knew what they were looking for, or from what they fled. When they had completed the elaborate circle, however, making such detours as had suggested themselves, they felt that their time had not been wasted.

They had not found Mr. Elderly—and he, of course, had been the main object of their search—but they had made a number of interesting discoveries which, they felt, might be of use subsequently to them and the detective.

Two gardeners' cottages had been investigated. One, at the far end of the ground, had been locked up, and had had every appearance of being empty. The other, situated on the side of the estate opposite to the lodge, close by a little wicket that led into the hills beyond, was also deserted; but a constable sat by the little wicket—fast asleep. They gave him a wide berth, and did not wake him.

These cottages—both empty, and one locked up—were not their only discoveries. From various points, they had been able to survey nearly all of the estate, and they had been struck by the extraordinary scarcity of the outdoor staff. As

a rule, one tumbled over gardeners wherever one went, but this afternoon there were hardly any. They only saw three during the entire journey. Where were the rest?

They had not been in the lodge—that had been fairly apparent. They had not been in the deserted cottages. They were not in the grounds.

"Do you think they have all been herded into the house?" asked Peter.

"It's possible," answered Angela.

But they doubted it. Already some prescience of the position, vague and unformed, was working its way into them, causing them to reject solutions which otherwise might have appeared obvious.

After the conversation between Last and Dawkins at the lodge gate, the cottages, the scarcity of gardeners, and the two guarded exits formed their chief discoveries; but another point intrigued Peter when the tour was over. He wondered why Mr. Elderly had built such an effective and substantial wall around his grounds?

Their feat accomplished, the ego in them incited them to return boldly. They gave Constable Dawkins a shock as they completed the circuit, bade him "Good afternoon," and turned up the drive. They gave another constable another shock as they passed him and commented on the warmth. But Inspector Biggs was not in the least startled as he watched them re-entering the house. He had followed them all the way round.

CHAPTER XIX

THE CLOSING NET

DETECTIVE DRUCE and the silver-haired old man were standing in the hall. The latter looked up quickly as Peter and Angela entered—his manner was almost bird-like in its nervous briskness—while the detective paused in the middle of a remark, and frowned.

"Hallo, Mr. Druce," exclaimed Peter, shamelessly. "We've just been on a little tour of inspection."

Druce made no comment just then. He merely inclined his head towards the silver-haired old man, and announced,

"This is Dr. Glade." To Angela he added, "I dare say you've met the doctor before?"

"No, this is our first meeting," chirped the doctor, advancing and taking her hand. "I am only sorry we could not have met under—h'm—happier conditions. But crises pass. Yes, crises pass. As a medical man, I can assure you of that, Miss Vernon." He turned towards Peter, with a smile. "We have still to be introduced?"

"My name is Armstrong," replied Peter, studying him. "I dare say Mr. Druce has told you I am staying here. Tell me, doctor—what's happened to Sir Julius?"

"Sir Julius?" repeated Dr. Glade, and pursed his lips. He glanced towards the detective, and shook his head. "I'm afraid I haven't any too good news of Sir Julius."

"Why, what has happened to him?" cried Angela.

"He's had rather a nasty accident," proceeded the doctor, and as he spoke there flashed into the minds of both Angela and Peter a memory of Mrs. Catesby's forecast. "There's

rather a bad hill before my house." They recalled the hill, too, in the housekeeper's prediction. "I'm afraid the chauffeur's brakes were defective——"

"Yes, yes, but is he badly hurt?" interrupted Peter.

"He is unconscious," responded Dr. Glade. "But—yes—I think we shall pull him through."

Angela gave a little exclamation, and turned suddenly away. Peter controlled himself more successfully, and continued quietly,

"What about the chauffeur, doctor? Was he hurt, too?"

"The chauffeur," murmured Dr. Glade, and again glanced towards the detective. "Better tell them, eh? Very sad, very sad. The chauffeur, my dear Mr. Armstrong, I regret to say, is—h'm—dead."

"The trip seems to have been a disastrous one," said Detective Druce, taking up the story. "When I left you, Mr. Armstrong, I found there was no available car, and I had to walk to the doctor's house. I met him, coming here in his own car, when I had completed three-quarters of the journey. He told me what had happened, and I returned with him here——"

"You mean, you haven't seen Sir Julius?" exclaimed Peter.

"I had to choose between seeing Sir Julius, who had been attended to, and returning to Miss Ayrton, who had not," came the detective's dry rejoinder. "Obviously, Sir Julius had to wait. But I am going back to see Sir Julius now, and then I will be able to see him myself—and form my own conclusions."

"Who is with him now?" asked Angela.

"I keep a nurse on the premises," broke in the doctor. "A most efficient woman—most efficient."

"Then I suppose it's necessary for you to go back?" queried Peter. "This minute?"

"I am particularly anxious to go back," returned Detective Druce, looking at the young man significantly. "I have rather a special reason, as perhaps you may guess."

He had dropped his voice, and Peter understood. Sir Julius's accident had interfered with the telephone message to Scotland Yard. The detective would have to get through himself.

"I'd like just five minutes with you, all the same," persisted Peter. "Perhaps Dr. Glade wouldn't mind waiting?"

"Not at all, not at all," agreed the doctor. "I'll just go out to my car and wait there, eh?"

"Very good of you," Peter thanked him. "But—just before you go—how did you find Miss Ayrton?"

"Shock—nothing but shock," responded Dr. Glade, and then added, thoughtfully, "but rather an odd case, all the same. I've only come across one other like it. The patient receives a shock—off she goes into unconsciousness—and when she comes to, the last emotion she experienced continues in exaggerated form."

He paused, and Peter put the expected question.

"What was Miss Ayrton's last emotion?" he enquired.

"Hatred of Mrs. Catesby, I should imagine," answered the doctor, with a whimsical smile. "To be accounted for, apparently—yes, I went into that—by the fact that Mrs. Catesby—very unwisely, as I told her—tried to force her to lie down just before the—h'm—unconsciousness. A trivial incident, but immensely large in Miss Ayrton's exaggerated condition. There is a somewhat mystic Latin name for her malady, but we compromise, for the sake of the less learned, on *Exaggeratis Profundis*. Miss Ayrton's exaggeration is so profound that she positively refuses now to see Mrs. Catesby—she is ready to scream the house down in her presence—so we have requisitioned one Lizzie, the kitchen-maid, to look after her. Of course, Miss Ayrton is in bed, and cannot

leave her room." He broke off, beaming. "There, sir, I have given my report, and will now await Mr. Druce outside. But, pray, do not be long," he added, to the detective. "I am a little anxious about Sir Julius, who is an M.P., and must be preserved for the nation—so, please, let us lose no more time than is necessary. Good-day."

He bustled out. When he was gone, Angela turned to Druce, and exclaimed,

"I don't like him! Do you believe——?"

Druce held up his hand. A constable came round the passage, and showed a disposition to loiter.

"Before I return with Dr. Glade," suggested the detective, "shall we have a few words in your room?"

They ascended in silence. Then, when they were safely shut in Angela's sitting-room once more, tongues were loosened.

Briefly and concisely, Peter related the story of their adventures. He dwelt longest over the conversation between Last and Dawkins, which he repeated almost word for word, while the detective smoked his pipe, and Angela stared intently at the carpet.

"Then you were in the drive when the doctor and I drove up?" commented Druce, when the story was over.

"We were," admitted Peter. "And we refuse to be chastised. Whether we acted wisely or not in the first instance, we got *something* for our money, as you'll admit."

"I'll admit that you were very fortunate," replied the detective, "and that you may not be so fortunate next time."

"Oh, I don't know," retorted Peter, airily. "Life's always a bit of a risk, however you take it. And one day, sooner or later, we've all of us got to be caught."

"Still, the whole effort of life is to evade the capture," said Druce, "particularly, perhaps, when there's a girl in the question. Do you want to be captured—to-night?"

"Say what you've got to say," conceded Peter. "But don't be cross with me if, on a question of detail, I happen to disagree with you."

"You are not going to disagree with me," returned Druce, very seriously. "You might, if you had only yourself to consider, but you won't as Miss Vernon is also involved, and would have to pay the penalty of any rashness on your part. What you have told me does not surprise me. I don't believe the doctor. I don't believe Mrs. Catesby. I don't believe the constables. And I don't believe Geary. It has been obvious to me for some time that an important development is about to take place—to-night—and there will be only one safe place in this house between sunset and sunrise, or I'm badly mistaken."

"Where is that?" asked Angela, annoyed to find her heart thumping.

"Here," answered Druce. "In these two rooms."

After a short silence, Peter said,

"Assuming that—what then?"

"Isn't it obvious?" exclaimed the detective. "Miss Vernon must not, on any account leave her sanctuary—and you must not, on any account, leave Miss Vernon. I shall be doing all I can outside—of that you can be quite sure. But even a Scotland Yard detective is not necessarily a genius, and I'm going to have my hands pretty full. If an accident does happen—well, Miss Vernon will need you."

"But won't *you* need him, too?" asked Angela.

Druce looked at Peter as he responded,

"There's rather a good old motto, women and children first. I want to act up to that motto, if Mr. Armstrong does."

"I do," said Peter, shortly. "But suppose there's a little bit of me left over for other purposes, as well?"

"There won't be," Druce replied. "At least, not without grave risks to—the women and children!"

"Tell us, at least, what you're going to do?"

"I am going to call up reinforcements."

"By telephoning from the doctor's house?"

"Yes."

"Do you trust the doctor?"

"Not a great deal."

"Suppose he interferes?"

"I think I am a match for one doctor."

"Plus one chauffeur?"

"What does that mean?"

"Why," explained Peter, "old what's-his-name said the chauffeur was dead. Suppose—he isn't? That'll be two to one. And the efficient nurse may have a knife in her garter."

"Peter!" exclaimed Angela.

"Sorry," replied Peter, doggedly, "but we're up against it properly this time, and it's no good mincing matters." He turned to the detective, who was revolving his points. "One reason we don't trust the doctor is because he doesn't seem trustworthy. But another reason is because his name and address were given to you by Mrs. Catesby—*and we don't trust her!*"

"She gave the name and address under compulsion," Druce pointed out.

"Maybe—but she chose a wrong 'un when she was compelled. I wouldn't trust that silver-haired old medico with a barge-pole. Why, look at his footling diagnosis of Miss Ayrton's condition!" he went on, with growing indignation. "Even a child could have seen through it. *Exageratis Profundis!* The prize idiot! Miss Ayrton's got some first-class reason for hating Mrs. Catesby, and for preferring Lizzie to look after her—and I mean to find out what it is!"

"I think you had better leave Miss Ayrton alone for a little while," responded Druce. "I saw her myself only a few minutes ago, and she is trying to get some much-needed

sleep. Lizzie is with her. But I am more interested in your other points, Mr. Armstrong—and you haven't such a bad mind for an amateur. . . . Perhaps, after all, it will not be wise to enter the doctor's house—alone."

"You don't mean you want to take him with you?" exclaimed Angela, involuntarily.

"I've already implied that Mr. Armstrong is not to leave your side, on any account," said the detective, "and, as I am going to take his advice, I trust him to take mine. It's quite true," he went on, turning back to Peter, "that I may find things pretty hot in the doctor's house. There may be a resuscitated chauffeur, and a nurse with a knife in her garter, and various other unpleasant things. But, at least, I can manage the doctor *alone,* and so, when we get in the car, I shall make him drive me to Brymoor village, where I *shall* be able to telephone. Yes—I'm obliged to you for your suggestion."

"The old fossil will probably object," reflected Peter.

Druce put his hand into his pocket, and drew out a useful-looking revolver.

"This stops all objections," he smiled.

"By Jove," exclaimed Peter, his eyes gleaming. "I don't suppose you've got a spare one?"

"I wish I had," replied the detective. "But—if you're wise —you won't need it."

He rose. Peter put one more question.

"We're playing for safety," he said, haltingly, and glanced at Angela as he spoke, "and so—perhaps—we ought to consider every alternative before we commit ourselves. Do you think I ought to get her out of this—before to-night?"

"Look out of the window," responded Druce.

They looked. Two constables were patrolling the gravel outside.

"These constables spring up like mushrooms," muttered Peter.

"Yes, and you'll find more of them about, I think, since your little tour," answered Druce. He went to the door, and listened. "There are footsteps in the passage. When I open this door, I imagine I shall find another outside. To try to escape now, Mr. Armstrong, would be—suicide."

"Don't you believe him," retorted Peter, to Angela; but his voice was not very convincing. "What the dickens would they want to interfere with us for?"

"That question is not quite as sensible as most of the questions you put," returned the detective. "They won't want to interfere with you, so long as you don't interfere with *them.* And, if you were not under observation here, what guarantee would they have that you *wouldn't* interfere?" He laid his hand on the door-knob. "Remember what I've said. It may be some while before I see you again. Stay here. Raise no suspicions. Your meals will be brought to you—I will see to that."

"And we are to stay here——?"

"Until my reinforcements turn up," concluded Druce. "When that happens, you shall know at once."

He turned the handle, opened the door, and was gone.

"Peter!" gasped Angela suddenly. "Did you hear—? The door!"

He ran to it swiftly, and tried it. It was locked.

CHAPTER XX

THE IMPORTANCE OF A SMALL BOY

AT the back of Greystones, across a small yard, stood a little wooden shed. It was about six feet by four, and the space available for movement was reduced by numerous shelves which stretched out untidily from the walls. Upon these shelves were brushes, blacking, boots, cloths, a knife-machine, and other implements of humble trade, but to one person this unprepossessing spot stood for something just a little better than its superficial ugliness. It was the little kingdom over which Freddie presided, the one place in which his diminutive ego could assert itself.

Unfortunate indeed is the person who has not a few cubic inches in which to become a temporary ruler. It may be a tiny room, or a chair that belongs unchallenged to one, or a bed, and the effort of life is largely an effort to extend those inches into feet, or yards, or miles. But no estate, however vast, can beat a shed six feet by four in the temporal joy it can provide.

Freddie performed great feats in his shed. He did not merely black boots and clean knives. He rode great horses, and smote kings boldly on the cheek, and—it must be related—broke into millionaires' houses. Once he had even slipped a gold watch out of Earl Beatty's pocket. From which it may be gathered that Freddie, while compelling our full interest, does not necessarily command our full respect.

But other, softer moments humanized that little shed. Sometimes—quite often, of late—another little figure joined

him there—the little figure of a smutty-nosed kitchen-maid. When first the kitchen-maid had come to Greystones, Freddie had been in an untrusting mood, and he had distrusted Lizzie as much as all the rest; but gradually their separate existences had drifted together, joined, and expanded. One day, Freddie now told himself, they would reign together in something larger than six feet by four.

"Yus, but if we ain't nippy, there won't *be* no day," he reflected, on this particular afternoon, as he entered the shed to do a little cleaning and rather more thinking. "S'elp us, there won't!"

The shed was dark, but something loomed white in the dimness.

"'Allo," thought Freddie. "Wot's this?"

He looked closer, and found that it was an envelope, standing upright in the bristles of a boot-brush.

"Well, I'm blowed," he muttered, as he read the writing on the envelope: "Lizzie, by favour of Freddie." What did that mean? By favour of?

While he was staring at the envelope, footsteps sounded outside, and he quickly seized the envelope and slipped it into his pocket. A head was thrust in from the yard outside.

"'Allo! What are you doing?" asked a voice.

It was the voice of a constable.

"Cleanin' my teeth," replied Freddie, cheekily.

"Now, then, what are you giving me sauce for?" said the constable.

"Goes with goose, don't it?" retorted Freddie.

The constable grunted, withdrew his head, and passed on. Freddie waited three minutes. Then he looked out, and beckoned to a girl who had just appeared at the other end of the yard.

"Come 'ere!" he called.

The girl approached.

"I was comin'," she said.

"Well, I wancher, Liz. Come in 'ere. I've got somethink for yer."

"Go on," giggled Lizzie.

"Shut up—not that sort of a thing," exclaimed Freddie, and, diving into his pocket, he fished out the envelope and thrust it under her nose.

"What—fer me?" asked Lizzie, sobering. "'Oo's it from?"

"Open it, and yer'll see," suggested Freddie. "The writin' don't give nothink away."

The writing was in block letters. And so was the writing inside, as they discovered when they tore the envelope open.

The contents of the envelope were intensely interesting. There were in another envelope, addressed in the same block letters to Miss Ayrton, four pound notes, and a half-sheet of paper. On the half-sheet was written:

"Two for Lizzie, for handing the enclosed to Miss Ayrton, and two for Freddie, for having handed this to Lizzie. And two more each, to come, if the matter is kept *absolutely dark.*"

"My!" murmured Lizzie, staring at the notes.

"Lummy!" muttered Freddie. "'Oo's the guy?"

The easiest method of finding out occurred to him, but when he suggested it, Lizzie made objections. A discussion followed, and the male won.

"It's orl very well, Liz," said Freddie, solemnly, "but we gotter be careful!"

He opened the envelope addressed to Miss Ayrton as he spoke, then gave an exclamation of disgust.

"It ain't English," he grunted. "More like Chinese."

"*I* know what it is," exclaimed Lizzie. "It's short'and!"

"Owjer know?"

"Well, look at it! And, of course, Miss Ayrton bein' a secretary 'd be able to read it."

"P'r'aps yer right," admitted the boy, impressed by her logic. "It's no good to us, any'ow."

"And ain't you fair done it!" retorted Lizzie, witheringly. "Now what's to 'appen?"

Freddie thought.

"You can put it into a fresh envelope, can't you?" he proposed.

"Then she'll ask 'oo it's from."

"You don't know that."

"Course I don't, stupid! But she'll expeck me to know, with 'er name not on the envelope. Someone must 'ave told me, then, mustn't they, if 'er name's not on the envelope?"

Again Freddie was impressed with Lizzie's logic. Lizzie was quite sharp. He strove to be sharper.

"Stupid yerself, Liz," he answered. "What's wrong with you writing 'er name, then, in printin' agin? That ain't 'ard, is it?"

Freddie scored that time. He kept an ink-pot and an old pen in the shed, and also a little soiled stationery in an old cigar box. A minute later, the shorthand communication was once more encased and addressed, and Lizzie departed on her mission.

"Oi!" called Freddie softly, just before she disappeared.

"What?" asked Lizzie.

"Come back and tell us," said Freddie.

He waited for ten minutes after she had gone, and would have waited longer had not affairs of state carried him into other fields. Half-an-hour later, he had forgotten all about Lizzie and the note, and was making his way through the grounds to the little wicket on the western side.

Unlike Peter and Angela, he had no need to conceal his movements as he approached the little gate, but his progress

was marked nevertheless by a strange furtiveness. He glanced many times from side to side, and when a voice from the wicket accosted him, he jumped.

"Where are *you* off to, sonny?" called the voice.

It was the voice of the constable on duty at the gate. He was now doing his duty better than when Peter and Angela had passed him, being wide awake.

"Goin' fer a 'ollerday," replied the boy, quickly recovering himself.

"And do you generally jump when you're off for a 'ollerday?" queried the constable. "P'r'aps you don't like my uniform?"

"Never did like policemen," grinned Freddie. "But I ain't frightened o' *you!*"

"Where are you goin'—for that 'ollerday?"

"Freshways."

"Oh—Freshways?" The constable seemed impressed, and his eyes narrowed a little.

"That's what I said."

"Well—and 'oo's sendin' you to Freshways?" demanded the constable.

"Quinn," replied the boy.

"Oh, did 'e?" said the constable. "And what's to make me believe that?"

" 'Is writin' might," suggested Freddie, and took a crumpled slip of paper from his pocket.

The constable read it, nodded, and opened the gate.

"You've got a bit of a walk," he observed. "You look like missin' your supper, young man."

"Go on—I ain't a slowcoach, like you," retorted the boy. "I've got to be back by seven."

"Whoa! Wait a minute!" called the constable. "What's it all about? What are you goin' to Freshways for?"

"If you can't guess, you're a mug," answered Freddie.

Freshways, the place to which Freddie was going on his mysterious mission, was four miles away from Greystones as the crow flew, but most people who made the journey did not attempt to emulate the crow. They chose a rutted lane that, winding round the base of great hills, could do the journey in eight miles, or a somewhat better road that gave the hills an even wider berth and took eleven miles.

Neither of these roads, however, was of any use to Freddie, if he were to be back by seven o'clock. He had to follow, as far as feet could follow, the route of the crow, which was across some four miles of sweeping hills and vales. For the first half of the journey the track wound up and up, and for the last half it wound down and down.

He had travelled about a mile when, to his surprise, he saw somebody coming towards him. He was surprised because one did not often meet strangers in these parts, but his surprise changed to perplexity when he recognised the man who was approaching. It was Professor Grinton.

He dived behind a boulder. He had no wish to be interviewed by Grinton. Awkward questions might be asked, and although Freddie was quite adept at inventing stories, he had no particular wish to add unnecessarily to the burdens on his conscience.

And so the professor approached and passed the boulder, unaware that a small boy was concealed behind it—a small boy upon whose actions depended the fates of numerous people, including possibly himself.

"Gawd—if 'e knew what was waitin' fer 'im," thought the boy, "'e wouldn't look so 'appy!"

For the professor had been smiling. He had discovered a rare plant, a plant he had hitherto met only in Spain. Of course, he might be mistaken . . . No, he was sure he was not mistaken! He would examine his specimen more closely when he got back . . .

Freddie proceeded on his way. A feeling of oppression began to settle upon him. It was all very well—but suppose things didn't come out right? They mightn't. What then? Even if they did come out right—for him and for Lizzie——

"Shurrup!" he muttered to himself. "What's the good o' thinkin'?"

He mounted higher. A valley led to the final climb. When he had scrambled to the top, he paused for an instant, and looked down at the sweeping country below him. It swept down to the sea, the horizon of which looked ridiculously high from the point on which he stood.

It was a lonely stretch of coast. For the most part bare, deserted, and barren, it was broken a little way to the left by a patch of foliage, amid which could be seen a few roofs and chimneys. Freddie made for this patch, and increased his speed.

The descent was not too easy. Small wonder that most people chose the longer road. And small wonder, too, that even the longer road was little frequented, for there was not much to draw the stranger to the little sea village of Freshways, unless the stranger had a painting kit with him. Then, indeed, he might be tempted.

It was nearly six o'clock when Freddie at length scrambled down the last slope, and entered the village of Freshways. He made straight for the water's edge, and, when he reached it, walked into the bar of the only inn the village boasted. It was called "The Ugly Duckling," which perhaps was not a very bad name for it.

A very large and very stout innkeeper blinked at him over the stained counter.

"And what can I do for you, sonny?" he enquired.

"Weather looks a bit cloudy," replied the boy, glibly. "Goin' to be fine fer the ducks."

This, despite the fact that the sun was shining brilliantly.

"Oh—so you think so, eh?" said the innkeeper suddenly becoming all attention. "Ducks, eh? Well, come inside, sonny, and let's talk about it."

CHAPTER XXI

THE PROFESSOR'S RETURN

THE policeman on duty at the little wicket had passed, until three o'clock, a comparatively peaceful time. His business had been to see that nobody entered or left the grounds without authority, and as nobody had shown the slightest disposition to do either the one or the other, his instructions had been easy to carry out. At the far eastern end of the estate, Constable Dawkins had been kept far busier.

It was in consequence of the monotony of his job, coupled with the humidity of the atmosphere after the morning's storm, that the bored policeman had ventured to relax his vigil, and to risk the little doze he had been enjoying when Angela and Peter had passed him.

But then Inspector Biggs had shaken him out of his serenity, and after that there had been no more peace. The lethargic bobby had straightened his back, in obedience to discipline and a sense of movement in the air, and by the time Freddie had come along to claim his privilege of passing out of the gate, all thought of slumber had been set aside.

Thus, when Professor Grinton reached the little wicket, some half-hour later, he found a very officious person standing in his way, challenging, it seemed, his very right of existence.

"Am I not allowed to pass in?" asked the professor politely. "Pray tell me what is the matter?"

"You don't know nothing?" demanded the policeman.

"How should I know?" replied the professor. "But I dare say I shall know, when you tell me."

"As to that, all in good time," observed the policeman. "What's your name?"

The professor blinked. The fellow was most unpleasant. However, in a difficult world, these irritations were bound to occur now and then.

"Ny name is Grinton—Professor Grinton," he answered, "though why you should require my name I have no idea. All this is very mysterious."

"That's as may be," said the policeman. "So you're Professor Grinton, are you?"

"I have said so."

"And you've been away all day?"

"Perhaps I could answer your questions more usefully if you would tell me why you ask them," suggested the professor. "I really don't understand you at all. What, I beg of you, has happened during my absence?"

"Excuse me, sir, but I'm to do the questions for a bit. You've been away all day?"

"All day, the whole day, and the entire day," the professor assured him. "Or, to be more accurate, I have been away—let me see—for seven hours-and-a-half. No, three-quarters. Does that satisfy you?"

"Then you don't know nothing?" queried the policeman.

"My dear man," exclaimed Professor Grinton, exasperated, "are we not going round and round in a circle? The earth, too, travels round in a circle, I know, but to some purpose. I assure you, I do not find these questions of yours at all amusing. Pray let me pass!"

"All in good time—" began the policeman.

"And you've said that, also," interposed the professor. "Upon my soul, sir, you almost make me regret that I never took up boxing."

The policeman, not over-loaded with intelligence, decided that professors were best handed over to higher authority. As a matter of fact, his orders had been to seek higher authority as soon as the professor came upon the scene, but he had been tempted to try his own hand first. Now he turned away, and looked rather anxiously along the path. He called to a figure in the distance.

The figure—another policeman, whose advent caused Professor Grinton to open his eyes even wider—approached, and a few official words were whispered. Then the second policeman departed hurriedly, and the professor asked, mildly,

"Have we progressed at all—or are we still in that circle?"

"I must ask you to wait a minute, sir," replied the policeman. "The inspector's coming along to talk to you."

"I shall be delighted to talk to the inspector, if he in the least resembles you," the professor observed. "But it would be useful if I could be primed a little. Tell me, please, have I committed a burglary? Or, perhaps, a murder? I'll be only too happy to fall in with any little scheme, to save time."

The policeman did not reply. The professor was rather too much for him, saving in the matter of physical strength. The professor himself realised his one limitation, and on this account only was forced sadly to accept the situation.

He did not have to wait long. Inspector Biggs appeared in a couple of minutes, and eyed the professor grimly from under his shaggy eyebrows.

"I am quite convinced I *have* committed a murder," said the professor. "There is no other way to account for it. May I know, please, whom I have killed?"

"Might it be Mr. Elderly, by any chance?" suggested the inspector.

The professsor's composure now seemed to be genuinely shaken.

"Mr. Elderly?" he exclaimed. "Bless my soul—what do you mean?"

"What I say," replied Biggs, ponderously. "Someone's killed Mr. Elderly, and we've not yet found out who it is."

"Forgive me if I sit down," murmured the professor, and lowered himself to a grassy bank. "I have had rather a long walk—and my legs are tired." He took out a handkerchief, and mopped his forehead. "Do you really mean to tell me, inspector——"

"Do I look as if I'm joking?" retorted the inspector. "Mr. Elderly telephoned to us this morning an urgent message, and by the time we arrived he had disappeared. Foul play is obvious, because there have been other disappearances, too——"

"Other disappearances?" gasped Professor Grinton.

"Yes. We began to think that you had disappeared, too, but now you've come back we want to know if you can tell us anything."

"Of course, I can't tell you anything," exclaimed the professor, distressed and indignant. "I've been away since breakfast—how should I be able to tell you anything? This is terrible! Upon my soul, I begin to feel faint! Mr. Elderly—why, only this morning—please let me get back to the house. Yes, I think I should like to get back to the house. My head is a little dizzy."

There was a pause. The professor rose, but seemed a little unsteady on his feet. The news had evidently moved him profoundly.

"You want a nip of something, to pull yourself together," observed the inspector. "Have a pull at this, sir. Then we'll get along."

He brought out a flask, and handed it to the professor. The professsor hesitated, then applied his lips.

"There—now you'll feel better," said the inspector.

"Indeed? I can't say that I do," murmured the professor.

"Sit down again for a moment."

"Eh? No, I don't think I will. I want to get back to the house——"

He stopped abruptly, and swayed slightly. The inspector sprang forward, and caught hold of him.

"He looks ill," he commented, to the policeman. "Do you think he can walk to the house?"

"Don't look like it, sir," replied the policeman.

"What's that? What are you talking about?" enquired the professor, dazedly.

"Better get him into this cottage," suggested the inspector, looking at the policeman fixedly.

"If you say so," muttered the policeman.

"I do say so!" Biggs's voice was sharp now. "Look lively, my lad, and help me!"

The professor made no further protest. He allowed himself to be led to the cottage, and seemed quite apathetic while the inspector produced a key and opened the front-door. Five minutes later, the inspector and the policeman came out again. Both looked rather warm.

"What now?" asked the policeman.

"I'll send someone along to look after him," answered the inspector, "and you keep on as you're going. When that boy returns, send him along straight to me."

Then the inspector departed, and the policeman returned to his vigil by the little gate.

True to his word, Freddie returned at seven o'clock. The policeman saw him in the distance, and timed him as he approached.

"You've done it," he greeted him, with a grin. "One minute to spare."

"Corse I done it," answered Freddie. "That's me!"

"You're to go straight to the inspector."

"Where else d'yer expeck me to go?"

"There's a feller called the devil."

"Same thing, ain't it?" A look of doubt suddenly entered his eyes. "Gawd, what a gime! Did yer see the professor?"

"I ain't blind," said the policeman.

" 'E come through, then?"

"Ay. 'E come through."

"What 'appened?"

"What 'appened? Why, we give 'im a bottle o' champagne."

"Did yer? And—where is 'e now?"

The policeman chuckled.

"Sleepin' it orf," he grinned. "In there."

He pointed to the cottage.

"Crumbs!" muttered the boy, and departed abruptly.

We have more important persons than Freddie to concern ourselves with, and two await us in a locked sitting-room on the first floor of Greystones; but we may follow Freddie for a few minutes longer before leaving him to his own unwatched resources.

He reported the details of his trip, and his report gave considerable satisfaction to Inspector Biggs. Then he went into his little shed, and found, to his greater pleasure than surprise that Lizzie was sitting there waiting for him.

"You been a time," exclaimed Lizzie.

"I've been to Freshways," replied Freddie. "Yer can't do that in a couple o' ticks."

"Freshways?" queried Lizzie. "Whatever 'ave yer been there for?"

Freddie tapped his nose. "Official" he said, impressively. "King's business!"

"What sort o' business," asked Lizzie.

"Ever 'eard o' the Mayflower?" answered Freddie.

Lizzie stared at him.

"Go on!" she murmured.

"It's a fack," said Freddie. "And now let's 'ear a bit abart you, Liz. Didjer give Miss Ayrton that note? I waited for yer, but yer didn't come."

"She kep' me," replied Lizzie, hesitating. "Kep' me while she read it—arst me not to go."

"Well—what 'appened?" demanded Freddie, impatiently, for Lizzie had paused. "You do tell a story rotten!"

"Nothin' 'appened," responded Lizzie, slowly. "Leastways—no, *nothin'* 'appened. But she was quite a long while after she read it, Freddie, she was—and once she begin cryin'."

Freddie shifted uncomfortably. He hated people when they cried.

"Did she tell yer what was *in* the letter?" he asked. "That's what I want ter know?"

Lizzie paused again. Then she shook her head.

"No, she didn't tell me nothin' about what was inside," she said. "There was a lot of it. But——"

"Go on!"

"Nothin'," retorted Lizzie, suddenly. "She cried—that was all."

"Where are yer goin'?" exclaimed Freddie, for Lizzie had jumped up.

"Got ter go—I'll be back presen'ly," murmured Lizzie, and vanished.

"Well, she's a nice 'un to 'ave as a gall, I don't think," muttered Freddie, and kicked a boot crossly into a corner.

Meanwhile, Lizzie stole up to Miss Ayrton's room. The door was locked, but she slipped a piece of paper under the door, and on the paper was written the word,

"Mayflower."

CHAPTER XXII

LOCKED IN

THE hours after Peter Armstrong and Angela Vernon found themselves locked in the latter's sitting-room formed the strangest prelude to the strangest night either of them had ever spent, or were ever destined to spend. Fear, frank and stark, ran through those hours—fear not to be despised, since they feared for each other; yet through the fear ran a thread of gold. Looking back afterwards, they found the sunlight and the shadow curiously interwoven, and could hardly understand how the memory of this grim occasion was not wholly black.

But so it nearly always is in this tangled world of confusion. We live every day with a golden dream and a rattling skeleton, and it is the golden dream we remember; and if we are destined to look back on life itself—on life with all its human preying and natural cruelties,—we shall doubtless recall most vividly the precious moments it has given us; the eyes that have smiled at us, the music that has uplifted us, the day we healed a quarrel with a friend, some glorious, unattainable sunset. And in those memories, implying our desires, may be read the gesture we craved to perpetuate had life been a little less difficult.

The thread of gold remembered by Angela and Peter on this afternoon was the thread that exalts friendship when a common enemy has to be faced. It was the thread that bound men together in the trenches—men of all nations equally—when frequently those men had little else in common. How

much more magic is it, then, when binding those who already have much in common, and who are already tied, even if unconsciously, by the greatest of affections?

But the affection that tied Angela and Peter was no longer unconscious. As yet it had received no full expression, and had merely been implied; but as they sat in their strange prison, sometimes talking, sometimes silent, there was no doubt in the mind of either that the affection existed, and that beyond the immediate terror lay bewildering, glorious possibilities—provided the terror did not swamp them.

"You know, Angela," exclaimed Peter suddenly, shortly after the detective had left them, "we're going to pull this off *somehow* or other!"

"I'm sure we are, Peter," Angela replied, "though I wouldn't think so if you weren't here—and I haven't the ghost of a notion how we're going to do it." She added, all at once, "Have *you?*"

"When the ghost of a notion materializes into solid substance," answered Peter, "you shall be introduced to it——"

"Then you *have* an idea?" she cried.

"Necessity is the mother of invention," he returned. "My grey matter is quite hard at it in its little workshop."

She laughed, and he rejoiced at the sound of her laughter. Things couldn't be so bad, surely, while they could laugh?

"One thing I *would* like to know," he went on. "Why on earth did old Druce lock us in?"

"Isn't there an obvious reason?" she retorted.

"My dear Angela, if you think *anything* has been obvious during the past half-dozen hours, you're a better logician than I am! Let's hear this obvious reason."

"He didn't trust us."

"Didn't trust us—about what?"

"About staying here. He wanted us to stay here, you know—and you *had* shown a certain disposition to wander."

"I see," he mused, doubtfully. "Old Druce said to himself, 'He's a nice young chap, but he's a fool. If he's not careful, he'll go roaming about, and leave Miss Vernon's side, and then she'll come to harm, and he'll never forgive himself. *Ergo*—' I suppose detectives speak Latin, since everything else is generally Greek to them—rather good that, what?—'Ergo,' says old Druce to himself, after aforesaid dissertation, 'I will lock them both in, and then they won't be able to do silly things.' That the idea, eh, Angela?"

"Yes, that's the idea," she nodded. "That's the way I meant he didn't trust us."

"I confess, I feel cross with old Druce, all the same," observed Peter, frowning. "He *ought* to have trusted us."

"I don't know, Peter," answered Angela. "We did wander about the grounds without his permission, didn't we?"

"Dash it all, whose place is this?" retorted Peter. "Yours was the only permission I needed. Anyway, didn't we bring some valuable information back to headquarters?"

"Yes, we did."

"Well then!"

"Not at all, well then! Just cast your mind back, young man, and remember what that valuable information was?"

"Pretty large handful to select from."

"Then I'll do the selecting. Some of the information was that a big affair was on to-night, and—and that if you or I roamed about—we might interfere."

"True."

"So, you see, Peter," she continued, "Mr. Druce might have even more reason to want us to keep indoors now than he had before."

"You mean—in blunt and unpicturesque language—he fears for our safety in the passages, and has locked the door as though we were a couple of children?"

"I mean a bit more than that," she said, and her voice was

now very grave. "I mean that he may have locked the door not only to prevent us from getting out, but to prevent somebody else from getting in."

"Sweet notion!" muttered the young man.

He rose suddenly, and walked to the door.

"What are you going to do?" she exclaimed, watching him anxiously.

"I'm going to see whether your theory is correct," he replied, and put his eye to the key-hole. "Yes—it seems as though you *are* right. He's taken the key off with him." He returned to the settee. "Which means," he burst out, exasperatedly, "that we are practically in Druce's hands! I tell you, Angela, I don't much care for that angle on things! Why, Druce has gone off in the car with that shifty old fossil, Dr. Glade. Suppose Glade gets the upper hand, and turns the tables on Druce? Bang goes our key—and our means of ever getting out into the passage again! S'pose there's a fire!"

"Druce had a revolver," Angela pointed out, though Peter's words chilled her a little.

"Yes, and how do we know Glade hasn't got one, too? I'll bet he has. And he may use it first. It seems to me he's very likely to use it first, for unless Glade is a born fool—which I strongly doubt—he'll be watching Druce just as closely as Druce intended to watch him. And then—who knows——?"

"Sh!" interrupted Angela, suddenly. "Someone's coming along the passage."

Footsteps approached, and halted. A key jingled outside.

"It's Druce!" whispered Angela.

"He's got back smartly, then," murmured Peter.

He jumped up quickly. The key was now being inserted. Suppose it wasn't Druce—suppose it was Dr. Glade?

When the door opened, it proved to be neither. In fact, the picture in the doorway almost made Peter laugh. A stout constable was entering with a tea-tray.

"Hallo, so you've entered domestic service," said Peter. "What's it feel like, being a parlour-maid?"

The policeman did not seem in a mood for badinage. He turned a little stiffly to Angela, and asked.

"Where shall I put it, miss?"

She pointed to a table beside the settee, and, as she did so, glanced beyond the constable. Another constable was standing on guard in the passage.

"Second housemaid?" Peter inquired, acidly.

"Ay, and there's a third and a fourth outside, too," retorted the constable, plumping the tray down on the table. He did not appear to relish his job, which pleased Peter.

"What an enormous staff!" commented Peter. "Do you come if we ring?"

"No, I don't," said the constable, bluntly. "I'll clear this away when I bring your supper."

"Oh, we're going to have supper," murmured the young man, with a glance at Angela. "Tell me—by whose orders have you turned yourself into a parlour-maid?"

"Never you mind," replied the constable.

The rudeness caused Peter to change his tone.

"Answer my question," he shot out, "or you'll get hurt!"

The constable was turning, after having deposited the tray, and he paused on hearing Peter's threatening tone.

"Better not get up to any nonsense, sir," he exclaimed. "As I told you, there's three of my mates outside."

"If I hit you hard on the nose," retorted Peter, "you'd be sore if the whole British army was outside!"

Evidently, the constable agreed. He wavered for an instant, then said.

"It was Mr. Druce—if you must know."

"Thank you," returned Peter. "Yes, I do rather like knowing. So he told you to bring us our tea, eh?"

"Yes."

"And where is he now?"

"I dunno."

"Oh, you dunno. But you must have had some conversation with him?"

"He told me to bring you the tea, if that's what you mean?"

"And he also gave you the key, so you could bring us our tea?" persisted Peter.

The policeman at the door moved a pace or two forward while the constable inside the room responded,

"He didn't tell me to answer questions, any'ow, so it's no good askin' them."

"You're quite sure it was Mr. Druce who gave you the key—you're sure it wasn't the inspector?"

"I'm sure I'm not goin' to stay 'ere any longer," barked the constable, and, covered by his mate at the door, and a third man who slipped into view from the passage, he beat his retreat.

When the door was closed and locked again, Peter very nearly swore. If Angela had not been present, he would have said some unprintable things.

"Never mind, Peter," exclaimed Angela, resignedly. "Let's enjoy the good things we're still allowed. This tea seems all right, anyway."

"Nevertheless, I think I'll sip the first cup," observed Peter. "I say, Angela—what about these policemen? They're a bit of a puzzle. First, we suspect the Inspector—just old Biggs alone. Then we hear a constable—Dawkins, at the gate—talking in such a way that we suspect *him*. If Dawkins is in league with Biggs, the gardener Last is in league with

Biggs, and other constables and other gardeners may be aiding and abetting him. The whole lot, eh? My hat, Angela —where are we getting to? You know, my head's spinning with it all."

"Perhaps a cup of tea will unspin it?" suggested Angela, passing his cup to him.

"Perhaps it will make it spin all the more," grunted Peter, suspiciously.

"I've tried it. It seems all right."

"Angela! I told you to let me test it first!"

"Yes, dear, but you talk so much."

He laughed, and shook his head.

"Can't help it, I expect. We've such a grand topic. Where was I? I was getting somewhere! It comes to this, Angela. The whole pack are against us excepting Druce."

"Excepting Druce," murmured Angela.

He looked at her sharply.

"Are you worried about—Druce?" he asked.

She hedged.

"I'm worried if he hasn't got back," she answered.

"Who *does* get back?" exclaimed Peter. "If Druce hasn't got back, neither has Sir Julius—and neither has Mr. Grinton," he added, suddenly. "Yes—what the deuce has happened to Mr. Grinton?"

"Let's forget things for five minutes and drink our tea," suggested Angela.

He drained his cup. It proved innocuous, and she poured him out another. The bread-and-butter, too, was inoffensive. They were thankful for small mercies, and the pleasant, familiar meal cheered them. But, afterwards, when they lit their cigarettes and gazed through the curling smoke at the unattainable view outside their window, he abruptly returned to the subject of the detective.

"Cards on the table, Angela!" he exclaimed. "What—really and truly—do you think of Detective Druce. Is he on our side, eh? Is he playing straight?"

"We'll know that very soon, Peter," she answered. "Won't we?"

"But I want to know now!"

"She thought for a few seconds. Then she surprised him by asking,

"If Druce is siding with the police, Peter, who is there left to have killed the policeman outside the library window?"

"What—you mean that Druce—?" cried the young man. "By Jove, Angela—you've left me at the post, this time. I never thought of that!"

CHAPTER XXIII

ATTACK

AN unnatural silence reigned in Greystones. It was akin to the unnatural silence that precedes the storm. The storm, when it comes, will drown all sounds, but just before its crash a voice may be heard a mile off, or a cow may low with odd distinctness in the distance. So, now, the momentary rattling of a window in a fitful breeze fell upon the straining ears of Angela and Peter, and the deep drone of the clock in the hall below.

"One—two—three—four—five," counted Angela.

"Six—seven—eight—nine—ten," concluded Peter.

Ten o'clock. And still no definite sign of any activity.

Supper had been served—again by the constables—at seven, and an hour ago a constable had entered to take the tray away. It had been a simple, one-course meal, yet even so they had not eaten all of it. Their nerves had been too on edge for appetite. Then had followed countless cigarettes, and spasmodic, jumpy chat. Angela, despite herself, was finding it increasingly difficult to keep her nerves steady.

"Look here, Angela," said Peter, seriously, "I think I've got one really bright suggestion at last."

"What is it?" she asked.

"This," he answered. "You go off to bed, and I'll guard the gate."

"I wouldn't sleep," she protested.

"I'm not so sure," he replied. "Anyway, I can't see any possible object in your staying up and wearing yourself to a rag."

"What would you do?" she enquired.

"I might shake down on this settee," he suggested. "But *I'd* have to keep awake, you know. And I could give you a call if you were needed."

She smiled, and shook her head.

"You mean, you'd make it your job to see that I *wasn't* needed," she responded. "I don't trust you, Peter—you'd cheat!"

"Be sensible, old girl," he urged. "It's best."

She looked towards her bedroom. Weariness had certainly come upon her. But she still hesitated.

"I hate to think of you, awake and facing it all, while I'm asleep," she said.

"But you said you wouldn't sleep," he pointed out, smiling.

"So I did. And—I'll make up my mind not to. Then, if anything happens, you can just come to the door, open it a crack, and call."

"That's the jolly old idea," he exclaimed.

And then a sudden silence fell between them. The position was not of their seeking, but it had its delicacy. Angela turned her eyes away, and Peter discovered himself staring unseeingly at the back of a chair.

"Queer position, isn't it?" he muttered. "But you've no need to be afraid of *me*, Angela. I—I love you too much."

She faced him now, her cheeks a little flushed.

"I know you do, Peter," she said.

And then, as though fearing to continue the conversation, abruptly vanished.

"But the position is even queerer for me than for you, my darling," murmured Peter, to the closed door of Angela's bedroom. "Two doors are closed against me now—I'm like a piece on a chess-board that's got no square to move to." From Angela's door he turned to the door to the passage. "I wonder?" he mused.

He crossed the room. The door to the passage was still locked, and now, he found, the key had been left in the lock. He could not peer through. He listened.

At first, he heard nothing. Then, with ear close, he did hear something. It was one of those indefinable yet unmistakable sounds of a presence. A suppressed yawn, a stretch, a half-turn of a stationary body—any of these might have occasioned it. But the significance did not lie in these details. It lay in the fact that somebody was outside—waiting.

Waiting for what? For utter silence in this very room? For signs that the prisoners had reconciled themselves to their position, and had gone to sleep?

Yes, that must be it. He had been wise to send Angela to bed. . . .

How long he remained there, staring at the door, he could not say. His mind was busy with plans and schemes. But suddenly a consciousness of something he was staring at grew upon him. A little bolt on the inside of the door. He had not noticed it before.

It took him three minutes to shoot the bolt. His hand moved towards it very slowly, as though its passage through the air might create a sound; and, when his fingers softly closed over the bolt, only by the slowest degrees did he slide the bolt along till it reached home. If the slightest noise had come from outside, he would have completed the job on a flash, but he did not want to give the enemy any clue to obstacles that might subsequently lie in that enemy's path.

Then, suddenly, just as he had become conscious of a presence before him, on the other side of the door, he now became conscious of a presence behind him. He turned—and very nearly broke his record of silence.

For, watching him, stood Angela, her eyes soft with an affection she could not conceal. Nor did she make any attempt to conceal it. In her clinging blue dressing-gown and little

blue slippers, she formed a picture which Peter never forgot.

He was tempted to throw everything to the winds, and to crush her to him. She gave no sign that she would have prevented him. But that very trust was one of the factors that held him back. The woman who asks to be kissed is she who first slaps your cheek, or runs away!

So, instead of doing what every human desire in him urged him to do, he answered her faintly interrogative pose by putting his finger to his lips, and then pointing to the bolt. She understood, and nodded. And then she, too, spoke in pantomime, pointing to the settee, which was well away from the passage door, and inviting him to it.

"I had to say good-night," she whispered, as they sat down together.

"I'm glad you had to," he whispered back. "But don't say it for just a second or two."

"I won't," she smiled. "I've something to ask you first. Why were you at the door when I came in?" He pointed again to the bolt, but she shook her head. "Something more than that, wasn't there?" she asked.

He nodded.

"I wanted to know if I could hear anything," he said.

"And could you?"

"One hears all sorts of things."

"Peter—I want to *know!*"

"I heard nothing."

She placed her hand on his sleeve, and gently pressed it.

"What a darling lie," she said; and, before he could stop her, she had risen quickly and swiftly crossed the room.

If the door had not been bolted, he would have suffered acutely during the few seconds that she stood with her ear bent to the key-hole. It would not have been merely fear for her safety, but human jealousy lest the door should

abruptly open and anybody else should see her just as she then was. But the bolt prevented any such catastrophe, so he waited patiently till she returned and sat down beside him again.

"There *is* someone," she whispered.

"I know there is," he answered.

"And you made me find out for myself, Peter! Well, I forgive you. What are you going to do?"

"When you go back, I am going to stretch myself out on this settee. If we can't get out, at least they can't get in."

"Yes, I'm happier now. I don't think I *could* have left you here alone, but for that bolt." He almost cursed the bolt. Had she come in, then, to sit with him? But the next moment he rounded on himself for his selfishness. "I was silly, not to have thought of the bolt before. I wonder why it's there?"

"Didn't you have it put there, then?" he enquired, curiously.

"No—why should I, in my sitting-room?"

"But your bedroom?"

She nodded. "There's a bolt there."

"Then you must use it to-night," said Peter.

"I'll do nothing of the sort," she retorted. "Suppose——"

She glanced towards the door to the passage, and he understood. Still, he persisted.

"That's what I mean," he whispered, earnestly. "Suppose—somebody we don't want to see does come into this room?"

"And finds you here?" she interposed. "Well, I expect you'd know how to deal with them. But I've got no sanctuary, Peter, that isn't also your sanctuary—whether it's this room or the next—so please remember that. I—I simply couldn't bolt or lock my door against you to-night, Peter—in case you should need to come."

She slipped her hand into his, and he kissed it; and if this

time he did not kiss her lips also, it may have been because, as before, she suddenly ran back into her room and left him. He could not be sure.

Despite her promise, he listened for the click of her key, or the sound of her bolt. He heard neither, and knew that she had kept her word.

Alone once more, he settled himself on the couch, and, switching off the light, allowed his mind to drift for awhile. Consciously and deliberately, as a reward for his anxieties, he entered the realm of wholly pleasant thoughts, wherein dwelt no disturbing elements, and where constables were as rare as the ichthyosaurus. We will not follow him. His thoughts are quite irrelevant, and were of interest only to himself. But presently he came out of his reverie, abruptly and guiltily, and glanced at his watch.

It was a quarter-to-eleven. Later than he had thought. He rose, and walked quietly to the bedroom door.

All was silent—so silent that he had to resist a temptation to open the door a few inches and assure himself that Angela was within. Then he went to the passage door, and, as he neared it, a smothered exclamation escaped him.

Very quietly, and very slowly, the key was being manipulated. Soon it would turn . . . and then the handle of the door would turn . . .

Peter Armstrong, as has been shown, possessed plenty of self-control. Had it been otherwise, on a dozen occasions during the past hours he might have committed some rash act that would have ultimately put him down for the count. Time after time he had withheld a certain pugnacious instinct, had swallowed his pride, and played a queer, patient game, believing in its utility even while definite schemes were unconstructed. Only by this process had he saved himself from extinction, for further service to Angela.

But now, for the second time that day, a mad impulse sud-

denly swept him off his feet. The first occasion had been when, previous to their tour of the grounds, he had risked failure largely for the fun of banging on a door with a walking-stick. Now, he again risked failure by giving way to an intense desire to come to grips with the nerve-racking presence outside, and to prove that he himself—he, Peter Armstrong—could be just as unpleasant if he liked!

So, while the key was being turned, he slipped back the bolt he had previously taken such pains to secure; and when the door-handle was being turned three seconds later, there was no further obstruction to the visitor.

The door began to open. Too late Peter thought of Angela as well as of himself, and wished he had first secured her door. Suppose the intruder *should* overpower him! He would then have free access to Angela's room . . .

There was sweat upon Peter's brow. He had no personal fear, but now he cursed himself inwardly for his folly. All he could do was to see that there were no disastrous fruits of that folly, and he steeled himself for the encounter as he had never steeled himself before.

As the door opened, he kept behind it. He was not going to risk a half-hearted attack. He would spring when he was ready, and when the intruder was well inside.

He heard a hand groping. What was it groping for? Of course . . . for the electric light switch! "I'm a prize idiot, if ever there was one!" groaned Peter, for the switch was on the intruder's side of the room. He could just discern the shadowy outline of the intruder, the outstretched arm, and slightly raised head. In an instant, the room would be bathed in light, and his advantage would be gone.

The Assyrians descended no more swiftly on their foe than Peter descended on his. He hurled himself forward, and the intruder crumpled under him.

CHAPTER XXIV

BEHIND THE PICTURE

THERE are few less pleasant experiences than that of struggling in the dark with an opponent whose identity, as well as whose purpose, you do not know, when your only guidance can come through your sense of touch, and when you are not even in a position to make use of that guidance. Peter, as he frankly admitted afterwards, went through an ugly ten seconds after he hurled himself upon the unknown, unseen intruder, and his mood received no comfort from a knowledge of his folly. In the next room lay Angela. Suppose this creature wriggling beneath him wriggled out of his grasp and turned the tables on him? What then?

It was a grim, silent struggle. Peter did not wish to awaken Angela—and he felt sure she was asleep, or, true to her indomitable spirit, she would have come to his aid—and his opponent seemed equally anxious to make no sound that would reveal his identity. Thus, only heavy breathing, and grunts and gasps, formed an obligato to the fight.

At the first onrush the intruder had crumpled up, but this had merely been an instinctive, protective move. A man who is fired at and missed will often fall to avoid being fired at a second time. That was the policy of Peter's opponent. After a moment of limpness, during which Peter's grip relaxed, the body heaved violently aside, and swung round. Peter's muscles tightened immediately, but he had lost his first advantage. They swayed, rolled over, and half-rose, still gripping each fiercely.

The strength of Peter's opponent was amazing. If Peter himself had not possessed muscles of steel, and a first-class public school athletic record, he would have been utterly helpless. As it was, he managed to hold his own, and was even preparing to gain a hold that would, he ruthlessly hoped, break his rival's arm, when his foot slipped, he tottered against a chair, and his head struck the wall. Something protruding from the wall swayed above him. For an instant, the world seemed upside down. Then, as he regained himself, he felt an abrupt lightening of the pressure against his chest. The body of his opponent dissolved, the door closed, and he was alone again.

If the intruder had been swift, Peter now acted with no less swiftness. Finding the electric switch, he turned on the light and made for the door. It was locked. With savage anger in his heart, he shot the bolt, and then turned to survey the scene.

The familiarity of the scene astonished him. This was the room in which he and Angela had sat. There was the settee. There was the silver cigarette box, gleaming peacefully on the little table. There was the unfinished painting. All around were signs of a happy presence, yet a moment ago this same space had been a hell of blackness, a velvet nightmare, in which there had been a life-and-death struggle. All that told of the struggle now was a small chair, tipped over against a curtain, and a picture on a slant.

He looked at the chair. It was this chair he had tripped over. He glanced at the picture—a heavy, gilt-framed picture of a little wide-eyed boy standing at the entrance to a cave in which sat a pirate counting gold pieces. This must have been the picture his head had come against. The contact had displaced it. A good thing it hadn't fallen upon him. . . .

He found himself staring at the picture. The subject was an odd one. It arrested him. Quite a good picture, in its way

—depicting either grim reality, or the pleasant imaginings of a small boy. But not quite appropriate to Angela's room, perhaps. He approached, to straighten it. His hand paused, however, at the edge of the frame. A slight irregularity in the freshly-revealed portion of wall behind the picture caught his eye.

Instead of straightening the frame, he further slanted it, feeling the wall with his hand. His fingers came into contact with a small excrescence. Instinctively, they pressed. A panel slid aside.

"Good Lord!" thought Peter. "Are we coming to it—at last?"

The recess behind the panel occupied some two cubic feet of space. In the recess were a large, bulky packet and a small black book. He opened the book. It appeared to comprise merely a list of names. But as he glanced down them, he suddenly uttered an exclamation. His eyes narrowed, and he found himself staring unseeingly at the page.

"Whew!" he muttered. "What——?"

His gaze fell upon the packet. He opened it. "Letters?" he wondered, during the operation. It was a bad guess. The packet contained bank-notes.

"My hat!" he blinked, soberly. "This is getting really interesting."

He counted the notes, roughly. The value of the packet was over a hundred thousand pounds.

"So that's it, is it?" he thought. "That's what all these people are after, eh? What they're searching the house for at this moment? And that's why John Elderly disappeared?"

The discovery thrilled him, yet it was not a comfortable discovery. As yet, nobody appeared to dream that John Elderly had hidden his treasure in his niece's sitting-room. Clever John Elderly! The last place they would suspect!

But when they had searched the entire house, and only Angela's little suite remained—then they would come, and matters would get lively . . .

"Yes, but one person knows already!" reflected Peter, suddenly. "That fellow just now—!" He rounded on himself for his clumsiness. "Why didn't I get a sight of the beggar?" he grumbled.

Well, no good could come of self-reproaches. He continued his reflections. John Elderly must have been an astute man—a man with a queer kink in him, too. The very picture he had concealed his secret under was ironically appropriate. A small boy, discovering a pirate counting his ill-gotten gold! For a moment, Peter felt oddly like that small boy.

Yes, but how had John Elderly acquired his wealth? And why was it hidden away? Peter took up the list of names again, and studied it.

"Wonder if Angela's asleep?" he thought. "Seems to me—if she isn't—we need a little confab!"

He tiptoed to the door of her bedroom, and softly knocked. There was no response. He knocked a second time, then boldly opened the door a crack, and called gently into the darkness.

"Angela!"

A faint stirring came from within.

"Angela!" he repeated.

"Peter!" now came her response. "What is it?"

"I say, Angela—can you come here for a few minutes?" he asked.

"At once," she answered, and a second later stood, gleaming white, in the doorway.

"Oh, my God!" murmured Peter.

"What's happened?" she whispered, anxiously.

"*You've* happened," he replied. "Isn't that enough to upset

anybody's balance? Well, never mind—don't listen to my nonsense. I've just made a discovery, and I want you to share it with me."

"I'll join you in a minute," she said.

Peter closed the door and waited. Then, once again, the door opened, and the pale blue wrapper appeared. Peter strove hard not to stray from business, but failed at the first attempt. The pleasure of having Angela with him once more was too great to take quietly.

"You know, you're too confoundedly pretty to live," he told her.

"I'm sure you didn't get me up to tell me that," she retorted. "What's your discovery, Peter?" Her eyes fell upon the wall. "Goodness!" she gasped. "Is that it?"

"It is," he answered. "Your uncle seems to have hidden his secret in your sitting-room, knowing that nobody would dream of seeking it there."

"What is the secret?"

"Rather a substantial one, Angela. It's something like a hundred thousand pounds."

"Peter!" she gasped.

He put his fingers to his lips.

"Low, please," he commanded. "We don't want the secret to be spread! Someone may be outside!"

He showed her the bundle, and her eyes grew very round.

"You found it in the wall?" she whispered.

"Yes," he whispered back. "And—do you realise—this little fortune looks to me very much like yours?"

"Mine?"

"Why not? Unless Mr. Elderly has willed it to somebody else. Or unless," he added, "Mr. Elderly is still alive—which he may be."

Angela rested her thoughtful eyes upon him.

"Peter," she asked. "What made you look behind that picture?"

"It's an odd picture," he hedged. "It sort of got me guessing. Did you choose it?"

"No—my uncle did. But—do you know, you lie awfully badly. I hope you always will lie badly—when you lie to me, anyway. So the picture got you guessing, did it? Now tell another lie about that chair. That's rather got *me* guessing!"

She pointed to the overturned chair, and he made a grimace.

"All right—I see you will have it," he murmured, and related his encounter with the unknown intruder. "Of course, I was a fool to unbolt the door," he concluded, "but somehow I just itched to hit somebody. It's bolted again now, all right. And now let me show you something else I found in that little hole. I'm not sure you won't get an even bigger shock this time."

He produced the book of names. The list—an extensive one—began on the first left-hand page, which contained the following sixteen entries:

"Mrs. Catesby
Gertrude Ayrton
Alice, parlourmaid
Hannah, housemaid
Ellen, housemaid
Lizzie, kitchenmaid
Davis, head butler
James, under-butler
Fox, chauffeur
Jenkins, chauffeur
Foulard, chef
Freddie, boots
Field, head gardener.
Clynes, second gardener

Black, gardener
Last, gardener."

On the first right-hand page were sixteen more names, running respectively:

"Mrs. Sterndale
Gertrude Taylor
Mrs. Tilson
Annie Woodcock
Maude Richards
Rose Dodd
Gaynor
Trafford
Peters
Tilson
Wharton
Topliss
Parris
Quinn
Phelps
Wragg"

Peter watched Angela closely as she read the names, and noted her puzzled expression.

"Let me help you," he said. "These two pages—and there are more following them—may be read separately, or they may be read in conjunction with each other. For instance, the two top names, opposite each other, are Mrs. Catesby and Mrs. Sterndale. Might this mean that Mrs. Catesby is Mrs. Sternsdale? If not, it's odd that all the names on the left-hand page are familiar to you, while all the names on the right-hand page are not."

"Two of them are," exclaimed Angela, quickly.

"Yes, I'm coming to them," nodded Peter, gravely. "If Mrs. Catesby *is* Mrs. Sterndale, then Gertrude Ayrton is

Gertrude Taylor, and so on, down the list. And we find, towards the end, that Clynes, the second gardener, is our mysterious friend Quinn, while another gardener named Black is Phelps. Phelps who, as we learned in the conversation we overheard by the lodge gate, has been 'done in.'"

"Well, go on," said Angela, for Peter had paused.

"When Phelps was first mentioned," replied Peter, slowly, "I took him to be the policeman who was killed outside the library window. Now, what are we to make of the fact that a man starts life in the name of Phelps, continues as a gardener named Black, and dies as a constable——"

He stopped suddenly, and, running swiftly to the door, switched out the light.

CHAPTER XXV

JOY AND TERROR

FOOTSTEPS were approaching along the passage, but it was not the sound of these footsteps that had caused Peter to spring so quickly to attention. Another sound had preceded it—the sound of somebody immediately behind the door moving suddenly away.

"Goodness!" gasped Angela. "Who is it?"

"Sh!" whispered Peter.

In the darkness he groped his way along the wall till he came to the picture. He could not close the panel in the dark, but he gently straightened the picture so that it covered the recess once more, and by this time the approaching footsteps had reached the door. Here they paused, and a minute ticked by.

"Reckon they're asleep," murmured a voice. It was the inspector's.

"Why not send 'em to sleep fer good?" replied another voice. This was the voice of the constable Dawkins. "That's what I'd do, if I had *my* way."

"We'll send them to sleep for good when we have to, and not before," answered the inspector. "At present they're doing no harm."

"Seeing's believing," grunted Dawkins. "What about 'avin' a little look at 'em, to make sure?"

Angela clasped her hands together, and Peter, with eyes wide open, began gently to snore.

"No, we might wake them," said the inspector, and Peter smiled in the darkness. "That'd be a silly thing to do. I've

given strict instructions that nobody's to go near 'em for a bit, and I see no reason why I should break my own instructions. They've been left alone since supper, and nobody's been near them for a couple of hours."

"*Haven't* they?" thought Peter. "A lot you seem to know!"

"The fellow I'm most worried about is that doddering old professor," Inspector Biggs went on. "*He's* a nuisance, if you like!"

"What—old Grinton?"

"Yes."

"What's 'e doing?"

"Raving like a lunatic. He'll have the roof off that cottage next! Yes, I think I'll have to find a way of stopping his mouth."

"What about giving me the job?" suggested Dawkins.

"No, thanks," replied Biggs. "I rather like that sort of job myself."

"Well, you've 'ad some experience, Quinn," chuckled Dawkins.

Peter felt a sudden pressure on his arm. Only by the greatest self-control did he prevent himself from exclaiming. He had not noticed that Angela had crept towards him, or seen her when she had laid her fingers lightly on his sleeve. He had been too intent on the conversation behind the door.

"Quinn!" whispered Angela.

Peter patted her shoulder, and went on snoring.

"And then there's another person that's got to be dealt with," continued the inspector. "Miss Ayrton's quieted down a bit too quickly for my liking. There's something up between her and Lizzie. If it's mischief, they'll deserve all they get. And, believe me, it'll be plenty!"

"I believe you, Quinn. But there's somebody else worries me more than all the rest put together, and that's this workman feller. 'Ave you got 'im tied up good and tight?"

The inspector laughed cynically.

"Mr. George Geary is good and tight in more senses than one, my lad," he observed. "He's tight to the world, and tight to a table-leg. *He* won't give us the slip any more!"

" 'Ope not," muttered Dawkins. "But there's some of us are gettin' jumpy. There ain't too much time, and they think we'd work quicker and more free, like, if there was a sort of general clearance. Well—you know what I mean——"

"Yes, I know what you mean," snapped the inspector, "and so I'll tell you what *I* mean—and you can pass it on. I mean to carry this thing through, and if professors or secretaries or workmen, or anybody else stand in the way, they'll get their ticket. I'm not sure that the professor and Miss Ayrton won't get theirs, anyway. Is *that* good enough?"

"Ah, that's talkin'," said Dawkins.

"Ay, and maybe we're talking a bit too much, and doing a bit too little," retorted the inspector. "Get a move on!"

They resumed their way, and Peter and Angela did not move until two minutes had passed. Then, still in the dark, they held a whispered consultation.

"Angela," said Peter, "I simply don't know how I am going to remain inactive during the next hour!"

"I don't see how you can remain anything else," she answered. "Do you mean about Mr. Grinton?"

"Yes. And Miss Ayrton. Grinton's evidently got back, and been shut up in one of the cottages. Don't you think I ought to try and see him?"

"But how can you?" asked Angela.

"If the door's locked," murmured Peter, "there's the window."

He walked to the window cautiously, and stared out. No one was in sight. The grounds looked black and deserted.

Angela's hand went up to her breast. She understood exactly how Peter was feeling, and she would not have liked

him to feel otherwise. But the prospect of some mad exploit filled her with apprehension, and her heart beat fast as she watched him raise the window gently and gaze out.

"Decent water-pipe, this," he reported. "I believe I could manage it."

"You must do what you think best," answered Angela.

He wheeled round. In the faint light that entered through the window, her slim figure was just discernible. He could not see her face, but he made a guess at its expression. Her tone conveyed it.

"I do nothing unless you agree to it," he said. "Perhaps my idea is a bit mad. But—somehow or other—I can't bear the thought of old Grinton raving about alone in that gardener's cottage. You could be well barricaded before I went, you know. You'd have to promise to lock yourself in your room, and bolt the door. The passage door would be bolted too, and we could shove some furniture about to make things snugger still. Then I'd shinny down the water-pipe, and have a look round."

"Having a look round would be no good," responded Angela, definitely. "If I let you go, it's got to be for a definite purpose, Peter, and you've got to have a definite plan."

"Quite correct, captain," answered Peter. "Then this is my purpose and my plan. I find Grinton first, and see he's o.k. Then I come back to the house and see that Miss Ayrton's o.k.—that is, if I can get to her, and if she'll let me. Seems to me she needs a bit of looking after, don't you agree, Angela?

"Of course, I do!" replied Angela. "She's more utterly alone than anyone!"

Peter nodded. "Well, we'll see if we can get her to be an ally and join *our* little party—then she won't be so lonely. And maybe she can explain our little black list. Wonder how she'd take it if I said to her, 'How do you do, Miss Taylor!' "

"Don't do that until you're sure how she'd take it," advised Angela. "Well, go on, Peter. You've climbed down a thin water-pipe, saved the professor, and saved Miss Ayrton. What do you do after all that?"

"After that, my dear—do you mind very much if I call you my dear?—I bide my time, and I creep along the passage to this door. I call to you softly, and lest anybody can imitate my voice, I also knock in a particular way—three slow, three quick, and three slow——"

"Slow—quick—slow," repeated Angela.

"In three's. And then, while I unlock the door on the outside—the key's still there—you unbolt it from the inside. I bring the key in with me. I tell you my news, with the door locked and bolted this time at *our* convenience. And then we have no more nonsense, Angela," he went on. "My news will comprise both a report of what I've done, and information of the plans I've laid while doing it for the Grand Retreat. Because, by then, I shall have arranged with my small forces, and that Retreat is going to happen!"

"Where do we retreat to?" asked Angela.

"I'm not sure yet," he responded. "But one thing is pretty certain—we may have to look in and see Dr. Glade on the way."

She repressed a shudder.

"It's funny, Peter, but that man gives me the creeps more than any other."

"I'm not in love with the blighter myself," agreed Peter, "but we've got to think of Sir Julius—and he's too far off to include in this little preliminary tour of mine. As for Dr. Glade, well, as likely as not he won't be there. He may be here, prowling about with the rest after a hundred thousand pounds—and *we'll* have that, thank you, upon us!"

She smiled at him in the darkness.

"You're a real optimist, Peter, aren't you?" she said.

"Of course, I'm a real optimist," he retorted. "I've a strong theory that, when optimism goes, life's over—or may just as well be. What's the good of being alive if you don't go on hoping? And getting up again every time you're knocked down? I'd rather die an optimist than live a pessimist. Wouldn't you?"

She nodded.

"I like your ideas, Peter Armstrong," she answered.

"Which makes me more optimistic than ever, Angela Vernon," he answered, "because it gives me hope that you'll like another I'm going to tell you." He moved a little closer to her. "Angela—although I really *am* an optimist, and no sham, I—I may just *possibly* slip while climbing down that water-pipe—or while poking around the grounds. And, just because of that very faint possibility, I'm going to say something first. No hedging this time. The real thing. My darling, I love you!"

"I know, Peter," she faltered.

"And it would be jolly if, while I'm poking about, I could say to myself, 'I know Angela loves me, too!' "

He had to wait a few seconds for her reply. But, when it came, it was quite convincing. He found two arms round his shoulders, and in the darkness felt her breath very near to his.

"You may, Peter," she whispered.

He did not hesitate this time. He knew that she wanted him at that moment as he wanted her, and he held her close. And, so ridiculous and disproportionate can be our joy in a single moment, they forgot the terror around them as their lips met for the first time.

Outside in the passage, in the hall below, in the grounds, that terror lurked. The forces of evil were loosened in Greystones that night, and were to prove greater and more potent than, even yet, either of them realized. Instincts that had been

dormant were asserting themselves, passions were gaining force, and dark cross-currents were racing toward each other for their chaotic clash. But to Peter and Angela, as they held each other enthralled, no evil existed. If pain can kill pleasure, the greatest happiness can conquer both.

It was Peter who broke the enchanted silence.

"Angela," he said, "before—this happened—I *thought* I could do all I'm setting out to do. Now, I *know* I can."

"I know it, too," she answered, lying bravely.

"But there's just one thing," he added, with a smile, "and p'r'aps I ought to have realised it. This makes it confoundedly more hard to leave you!"

"I'll take care of myself, Peter, for both our sakes," she promised.

"Yes, you *must!* You must lock yourself in your bedroom, and bolt yourself in, and barricade yourself in. You must answer no response but that of my lovely voice and our signal—three slow, three quick, and three slow . . . I say," he broke off, "can you hear me from your bedroom if I knock at the sitting-room?"

"If I'm by the bedroom door," she answered, "which is where I will be."

"Right. Then all's settled. But—even now, Angela—I'll stay here with you, if you want me to."

It was a moment of temptation, for she knew that he meant it. While she hesitated, a sudden sound was borne in through the open window by the night breeze. It was the sound of a distant, muffled cry.

CHAPTER XXVI

OUT OF THE WINDOW

THE road to great adventure is varied. It follows no prescribed pattern. It may be a wide road, or a narrow road, or a river, or a mountain pass, or the sea. Or it may be a water-pipe. And the water-pipe has this advantage over other routes; it is an adventure in itself. Having reached the bottom, one can claim that something has been achieved, if one achieves no more.

Peter Armstrong, however, desired to achieve considerably more as he climbed down the water-pipe below the sitting-room window, watched anxiously by Angela.

"If I ever build a house," he reflected, half-way down, "I'll see that all the water-pipes are good and fat. These thin ones are ridiculous!"

Nevertheless, he managed to reach the bottom with no damage greater than a few scraped knuckles, and alighting on the soft grass he turned and looked up at the window. Obedient to instructions, Angela closed it, but she did so with misgivings. With the window closed, Peter seemed farther away. Still, as Peter had said, this was not time for sentiment. The motto he insisted on was "Safety First"—in so far as Angela was concerned.

An odd sensation pervaded Peter as he found himself on the lawn. Apprehension might follow, but his first reaction was that of a schoolboy who had unexpectedly been released from detention. Or, perhaps, of a schoolboy who had taken French leave, and climbed down a water-pipe.

To feel that he could go this way or that, after his hours of captivity, was a delightful experience. The horizon was boundless.

But Peter did not allow himself the luxury of indulging in his momentary reactions. The sound of that muffled cry was still in his ears, and he meant to lose no time in tracing it to its source. It had not come from the house, nor, he believed, from the direction of the lodge gate. It appeared to have been borne across the grounds immediately ahead, and to have come from the direction of the cottages.

Two alternatives lay before Peter. He could make for the comparative security of the protected path under the boundary wall, and work his way that way, or he could adopt a bolder, shorter route straight across the lawns and through the flower-gardens. Caution was necessary, but so was speed. He glanced about him, hesitating.

There was no moon, and the night was nearly pitch black. As far as he could determine, no one was about. Sounds existed, but they were not human sounds—merely the little night noises that exist unrelated to our own troubles, although our moods often translate them into personal significance. The bat that flapped over Peter's head had no concern with Peter's fate. Peter might fall dead, and the bat would go on flapping just the same. The little breeze that stirred an insecure rose-tree would waft the rose's fragrance whether Greystones stood or burned. The rat that slipped along through the shadows, and rustled a tuft of uncut grass would have lived on succulent newly-born chickens, whether Peter had been Rockefeller or the Emperor of Japan, or the resuscitated apparition of William the Conqueror. . . .

"I'll risk it," thought Peter, and cut across the lawn.

The lawn was open—too open for absolute comfort, even in the concealing darkness—but there was greater security when the flower-gardens beyond had been reached. Here he

turned for an instant, and gazed back at the house. The light in Angela's bedroom twinkled faintly, and warmed him, although he considered that she would have done more wisely to have put it out. Other lights, however, gave him no such pleasant sensations. All the blinds were down, and the interior of none of the rooms could be seen from where he stood, only shadows flitting across the blinds.

"Crows!" frowned Peter. "That's what they are! Or —hares?"

A mixture of both, perhaps. Well, anyway, he could not waste any time over conjectures, and there was at least some temporary comfort to be found in the number of the shadows. The more there were congregated in the house, the fewer he would find outside.

He did not find any outside, and this struck him as a little odd. No challenge came out of the darkness, no one shot up to obstruct him. He appeared to be in the grounds alone.

He went, first, to the nearer of the two cottages—the cottage that stood by the little wicket. The cry had seem to come from there, although it was impossible to be sure. He walked round the cottage as a preliminary precaution. It was in utter darkness. Not a single light glimmered from back or front—but if eyes were watching from any of the blacked-out windows, these could not be seen. The unpleasant possibility that eyes were gazing at him occurred to Peter.

Well, it had to be risked. He walked boldly now to the front door, and listened. There was perfect stillness within. He tried the door, and found, to his surprise, that it yielded.

Academically, the discovery that he could enter the cottage rejoiced him. Emotionally, the discovery had its drawbacks. To enter a dark cottage uninvited in enemy country is not the happiest experience. But, not being out for happy experiences, he pushed the door open gingerly, and stepped inside.

In the darkness of the front parlour, he paused. If anybody had seen him enter, they made no sign. He called softly:

"Mr. Grinton!"

No response.

"Mr. Grinton!" he called again, a little more loudly this time.

Still no response. Well, he told himself, of course there would be no response! If Mr. Grinton was in a condition to respond, with the door unlocked, there would be others in the house, as well.

The sensation that the place was empty gained on him. He risked striking a match. Its light revealed a comfortable room in slight disorder. Also, doors leading to other rooms.

An instinct of caution urged him to pull down the blind. The cottage was concealed from the house; still, you never knew. Then, finding a candle on the mantelpiece, he lit it, and began a tour of the cottage.

Its size astonished him. He had no notion, from the outside, of its accommodation. He was also astonished at the number of bedrooms, and of beds in the bedrooms. "It might be army barracks!" he muttered.

None of the beds were occupied, however. There was not a soul in the place, living or dead. But Peter made one discovery in the last room he visited—a small cellar under the parlour. On the ground, near a corner of the wall, was a small, flat object.

He stooped and picked it up. It was a specimen case.

"That's Grinton's!" he murmured, recognising it. "Then the poor old chap *has* been here! And they shoved him——"

He almost saw red. He slipped the case in his pocket. "By God, somebody'll pay for this before long!" he muttered. "If that was Grinton's cry, where have they taken him?"

The second, the farther cottage, flashed into his mind. Perhaps they had taken him there? In any case, he must go there. He had ransacked the cottage he was in from top to bottom, and there was nothing further to be found.

He left the cottage, extinguishing the candle and taking it with him. His pace increased. Then, suddenly, he pulled up, on a thought.

"That money," he reflected. "I hope Angela's stowed it back in its hole—with the beastly little black book! What a fool I was! I was leaving so hurriedly—on hearing that cry——"

Then he smiled.

"I'm forgetting Angela's a girl of sense," he consoled himself. "If I'm a muff, *she's* not!"

Suddenly the second cottage stood black before him. He blinked at it, almost apologetically. He had not been thinking of it—he had been thinking of Angela.

As before, he made a preliminary precautionary tour. As before, the cottage showed no light. But history did not repeat itself entirely. When he tried the front door, he found it locked.

"Damn!" he muttered. "Wonder if it's any good knocking?"

He rapped with his knuckles. Softly, at first; then more loudly. The sound was uncanny. It reminded him of speaking into a room when nobody was there. He called.

"Hallo!"

He thought he heard something stir.

"Hallo! Hallo!" he called again. "Hi! Mr. Grinton!"

This time, silence.

His hand, groping about, came upon a bell. He rang it. That was the worst sound of all. It was not an electric bell, which has something respectable and above-board about it, but one of the old-fashioned sort. You pulled a bit of rusty

iron by the door, and a bit of elementary wire stirred a cobwebby, blackened bell somewhere in the kitchen out of its sleep. Then, if anybody was in the kitchen, somebody came along and opened the door. But, if there was nobody in the kitchen. . . .

Peter rang three times. The last time he pulled so hard that he pulled the rusty iron out of its socket. The bell jangled harshly, in protest, filling the world with its anger. The protest died down, grew fainter and fainter, and stopped. Peter had an odd sense that he had killed the bell.

What next? Perhaps he could break the door in? He took hold of the knob, and shook it. It jeered back at him.

A window, then? He edged along the wall till he came to a window. It was shuttered on the inside. He discovered that all the windows were shuttered on the inside. None offered any hope of entrance.

"There must be some precious secret in there, to be guarded so securely," reflected Peter. "If only——"

He stopped short. Again, something stirred! Or was it his imagination? He glanced upwards. The branch of a tree was certainly rubbing against the roof, and the leaves were fluttering softly against the chimney. Yes, perhaps that was what he had heard. Perhaps . . .

"My God!" muttered Peter.

Something heavy had fallen to the ground inside.

Peter was standing beside one of the windows, and now, without hesitation, he smashed the glass with his bare fist. Then he pressed his shoulder against the shutter, and shoved for all he was worth. But he could not get a good purchase. The aperture was small, while the shutter within was large and massive. He broke every window, with the same result. The shutters had not been designed to yield.

"What's the matter with me?" groaned Peter. "Am I a fool, or what? Can't I think of *anything?*"

His impotence dismayed him, baffled his impulses, and hurt his pride. All he had got for his pains was a bleeding hand.

He listened again for any sound from within. He did not hear any, nor had he expected to hear any. That gruesome thud had come upon his ears with a sense of finality. The bell would ring no more. The object that had fallen would fall no more. The voices of the cottage were silenced for ever.

CHAPTER XXVII

THE THING IN THE COTTAGE

BUT if the cottage was silent, the grounds suddenly became alive with little noises.

At first Peter did not notice them. He was too absorbed in his contemplation of the cottage, and the noises were also too faint to disturb his ear; and even when his ear did record them and convey them to his consciousness, he attributed them for awhile to unmenacing sources—to birds awakened out of their night silence by some little incident, or an owl flopping heavily about its business, or a fox slipping quietly through the undergrowth. Then all at once his self-protective instinct warned him, in response to a snapping twig, and before he realised it he had darted round the cottage to find security in a thick clump of bushes.

Fear did not direct him to the bushes. There was a smouldering rage in his soul that badly desired expression and would have rejoiced in a definite scrap, whatever its ultimate issue. But constantly dinning into him during this uneasy period was the necessity to preserve himself for the sake of Angela, whose predicament he scarcely dared dwell on should he, like so many others, disappear. That was not to be thought of. Presently, he would strike, and with all the fervour in him he hoped he would strike hard. But, meanwhile, a clump of concealing bushes had its value.

The noises grew louder, and more distinct. It was evident now that they emanated from neither owl nor fox. They were human footsteps, advancing cautiously, and drawing ever closer.

Presently, they ceased. Three minutes went by—three minutes that seemed like three hours. Peter strained his ears to hear the resumption of the footsteps—to hear them pass on, and grow fainter and fainter. He cursed the soft grass that would render the resumption of the footsteps possible without his knowledge. Perhaps they *had* been resumed? Perhaps they had never ceased at all, but had merely been obliterated as boots left gravel? In that case, his vision of someone standing outside the cottage, listening for him even as he himself was listening, was incorrect. In that case, the newcomer might be edging his way round the cottage and drawing closer to him every instant! Peter's nerves grew tense, and his muscles alert. If anyone had come within three feet of him at that moment, it would have been bad for them.

He was just concluding that the footsteps had really passed on when the comfortable theory was abruptly dispelled in a most convincing manner. Low voices came to him. He judged them to be about ten yards distant.

"Queer!" murmured one.

"Damn queer," murmured another.

"He's given us the slip."

"'As 'e? We ain't finished yet!"

"That's right. He can't have got far."

"Corse 'e can't! 'E's in the grounds somewhere. We'll find 'im, if we keep on lookin'."

"Yes, but it's like looking for a needle in a haystack! Suppose he *has* left the grounds?"

"Not it! 'E'd never leave the gal."

"There's a damn silly thing to say! He *has* left the girl."

Perspiration broke out on Peter's brow. They knew, already, that Angela was alone . . .

"Go on! You don't get me! Wot I mean is, 'e'd never leave the gal by goin' any distance—and that *ain't* a silly thing to say! It was that old fool 'ollerin' that brought 'im out.

Wouldn't yer 'ave thought Quinn'd know 'is job better'n to give 'im the chance? *I'd* 'ave stuffed 'is mouth, I would!"

"Maybe you'll get your own mouth stuffed one of these days, Tilson! You think you're a clever mug, don't you?"

Tilson! Tilson! Where had Peter heard that name? He'd heard it somewhere . . . lately . . .

"Shurrup! I'd match my brains again yours, any day! Some o' you fellers take too much fer granted. Yer took it fer granted the old professer was past 'ollerin'. Very clever, I don't think! Yer takin' it fer granted this other young chap's done a bolt——"

Tilson! Of course! One of the names on the second list. Peter visualised the page. Hadn't there been two Tilsons? Yes, a Mrs. Tilson; that was the parlour maid, Alice—third on the list. And then, lower down, another Tilson. One of the chauffeurs . . .

"If he hasn't done a bolt, what's the vine doing, all broken and torn, at the foot of the water-pipe? And what about all these knockings and things we've heard?"

"We might go back an' make sure."

"Idiot! Quinn's doing that. And what we've got to do is to look after *this end*. . . . He wasn't at the first cottage, so he'll be somewhere round about here—listening to us, maybe, at this moment."

"Listening to us, eh?" The voice was malicious. Peter found himself hating Tilson. "That's good. Then if yer listening to *this,* my lad, jest you learn wot's comin' to yer! We're jest about goin' ter twist your 'ead off when we find you——"

"Oh, for God's sake, shut up!" rasped the other. "Let's have a look at the cottage. Of course, he couldn't have got in, but——"

An exclamation followed.

"Say—look here!" exclaimed the astonished one. *"Now*

tell me he hasn't been around here. All the blessed windows are broken!"

"So they are," murmured Tilson.

"Do you suppose he *has* got in?"

" 'E's tried."

"You're helpful, ain't you? Of course, he's tried. I'm showing *you* that! The question is—has he succeeded?"

" 'Ow? Down the chimney?"

"My God—if he has succeeded!"

"Ah!"

"You know what that means?"

"Cat'll be out of the bag."

"Yes."

"Well, there's more'n one cat. 'E'll 'ave to be silenced, though. 'E'll know too much about Elderly then. . . ."

Elderly! Was Elderly inside? Was it Elderly whom Peter had heard—and who had fallen to the ground with a thud?

Peter's mind raced. Elderly in this cottage, the professor in the other—at least, as Peter knew from the little specimen case, the professor *had* been in the other, though obviously he had been taken somewhere else by now. . . . And, back at the house, Angela locked in her room and waiting for him, with heaven knew what menace immediately threatening her!

The thought of Angela maddened him. An enormous gulf appeared to separate them, yet only a few minutes ago they had been so close! He must get back to her. But first there was John Elderly . . .

"Look here! If that chap's got in, we'd better follow him!"

" 'Ow can we? Quinn's got the key—or did 'e give it to that precious detective?"

"Well, *Armstrong* didn't have the key, anyway, so if he's found his way in, I expect we can. Come on!"

"Wot's the idea?"

"Well, it isn't supper at the Carlton! Go round the place, of course, and——"

"Why not report to Quinn?"

"You called Quinn a mug just now. When you've got a chance to be cleverer, you shoot off in another direction. Stop talking! Follow me. And, if there's any trouble, don't pause to ask the time or discuss the weather. It wouldn't make a hell of a difference—not with things as they are—if Mr. Peter Armstrong woke up to-morrow morning in heaven."

The work of investigation proceeded, and for a minute or two there was silence. At one moment, when the coast seemed clear, Peter very nearly made a dash for it, but two thoughts deterred him, and diverted him from taking the course which his most human instinct begged him to do. He had a job outside the house before he returned to it, a job that needed completing. And, secondly, to rush back would be to express his disbelief in Angela's competence. He must rely a little on Angela's wits, as well as on his own. The game was too big for him to play single-handed. Angela, knowing that he needed her as much as she needed him, would act well and wisely in any new crisis, of that he was convinced; and, even if he had not been convinced, to get back into the house would be a tricky business, and one requiring all the patience he could command and all the knowledge he could acquire.

So, chafing, he still waited in his clump of bushes, and soon the voices were renewed.

"He *hasn't* got in—that's clear," said the first speaker.

"Then let's go back," answered Tilson.

"Might as well. But I think we ought to bring Quinn along, all the same—if he can tear himself away!"

A third voice suddenly broke upon them.

"He *has* torn himself away," exclaimed the third voice.

"And here he is. A devil of a time you take over a job! Haven't you found him?"

"Looks like it, don't it?" retorted Tilson. "*You* 'ave a look!"

"Any news up at the house, Quinn?" asked the first speaker.

"Plenty. But let that wait. What's happening here?"

"Have a look at those windows."

"By God!" exclaimed Quinn, after a pause. "Who's done that?"

"Obvious, isn't it?"

"Well, then, why have you——"

"Steady, Quinn. This is a miniature forest. I'm more interested in the inside of the cottage at the moment. Armstrong's been here—that's plain. He tried to get in—*that's* plain. He didn't get in—that's also plain. But what isn't so plain is—*why* did he try to get in—why did he try so damned hard?"

"You're right, Trafford," said Quinn. "We've got to find that out."

"You've got the key?"

"Yes."

"I thought you gave it to your superior—the detective?" Trafford's voice was slightly sarcastic.

"I did," snapped Quinn. "He wanted it. But someone handed it back to me afterwards—wasn't it you?"

"Me? No! I've never had the key!"

"Well, someone did. It was dark. Now, then—forward we go—and look after yourself, if there's any trouble."

Peter heard a key jangle, heard it inserted in the heavy door that had thwarted all his efforts, heard the door creak open. Silence fell again.

But only for a few seconds. A hoarse cry suddenly came from within, and a savage exclamation.

"My Gawd!" came the muffled voice of Tilson.

Then another silence, till all at once the door was flung open again, and feet came hurrying out. Faintly discerned by the watcher in the bushes, three figures came running from the cottage, and raced back towards the house. The blackness swallowed them up.

Peter waited, transfixed. What had they found in the cottage? Whatever they had found, it had been unexpected. What had they expected to find?

"Obviously, they expected to find John Elderly," thought Peter. "John Elderly—dead? Or, perhaps—yes, that must be it! They had not believed him to be dead, and have now found him lying stiff—where I heard him fall! And they've gone back to the house to tell the others."

He crept out of his concealment. He crept cautiously towards the cottage, and his heart gave a bound.

The door was wide open. They had not troubled to relock it.

"By Jove—here's my chance!" he muttered. "Now I'll find out. At last!"

He passed under the heavily-vined porch, and entered the cottage. It smelt cold and damp. He listened. Hearing nothing, he struck a match.

The light spurted, flickered, and steadied. A few feet away, outstretched on the ground, lay a still form.

"John Elderly!" murmured Peter. "There's the poor old chap——"

He took a step forward, and then bent down suddenly, with a gasp.

It was not John Elderly. It was the detective, Druce.

CHAPTER XXVIII

THE CONVERSATION IN THE YARD

THE sight of the detective lying on the cottage floor reduced Peter's mind to a condition of chaos. For a moment he could do nothing but stare. His mind became inactive, his senses numbed. He even forgot human sympathy as he regarded the prone form—forgot that it marked the end of a life, the extinction of a vital existence. All he knew was that the world was standing on its head, and that it would take very little to make him stand on his head with it.

It was obvious that Detective Druce was dead. Peter knew this even before he knelt down to make assurance sure. But how he had died, or what his death signified, remained a blank mystery.

Suddenly—as suddenly as his numbness had descended upon him—reaction set in, and his brain began to work. It worked fast and feverishly, struggling out of the chaos through the sheer necessity of law and order. Little flashes of illumination came to him, and if the workings of his mind could have been recorded, they would have resembled something like this:

"Now, then! Steady, Peter! Everything has an explanation, and you've got to sort some sort of an explanation out of this. He's dead. Druce is dead. His death was not merely a surprise to Quinn—that is, to Inspector Biggs, alias Quinn. It was a shock, and a bad one. Quinn and his friends wanted Druce to be alive. Quinn had given Druce

the key to the cottage. Then Druce and Quinn must have been allies—and Druce was throwing dust in my eyes from the word go. . . .

"Yes, I can understand that now. I was getting suspicious of Biggs. Well, then, if Druce was not also pretending to be suspicious of Biggs, I would be suspicious of Druce. It was necessary to import somebody who would keep me quiet, and who would apparently be doing the work I wanted to do myself. All very clever, though I expect I was a bit of a fool. . . . Well, never mind that. Where are we?

"Druce keeps Angela and me quiet. When we begin to grow restive, he locks us up—again under the guise of friendship. He says it is for our protection. But it is really because he has got to join Quinn, alias Biggs, in his work. Yes—that's all clear. But when Druce (who of course must have another name) enters this cottage—with the key given him by Quinn, alias Biggs, something happens. John Elderly ought to be lying here dead. Instead, Druce lies here dead!

"Who killed Druce? Where is John Elderly?

"Of course, Druce is a crook. So is Biggs, alias Quinn. He wasn't a real detective, Biggs isn't a real inspector, and the policemen aren't real policemen. They've assumed these rôles for some reason or other. What reason?

"Why—of course—to keep the *real* police away!" A light ran through Peter's brain. "Let's begin at the beginning. Something bad happens. The police will investigate it. The something bad is the disappearance of John Elderly. So the people who would get into trouble pretend to be bobbies, and make sure that the genuine articles don't appear. They coop us up. They cut telephone wires. They send telegrams preventing expected guests from turning up. And the game has got to continue until they have found—a little black book, and a hundred thousand pounds!

"By jove—I'm getting near it. But what's the story of the hundred thousand pounds? And how do all these horrible people come to be congregated at Greystones, the home of John Elderly?"

Well, that was enough to go on with, and had these reflections taken as long to pass through his mind as they have taken to write down, Peter would not have developed them even to this extent. But they came tumbling into the brain, one on top of the other, with lightning speed, while his eyes were still fixed on the tragic figure on the ground.

One more thought came to him before he turned to go. Druce had never intended to telephone to Scotland Yard, and probably never returned to Dr. Glade's house. He was hand in glove with Dr. Glade, just as Quinn was, and Mrs. Catesby, and all the rest of them. All the rest of them, that was, excepting the individual who had killed Druce, and who, assumedly, had also killed Constable Phelps outside the study window.

Then the vision of Angela, enduring heaven knew what at the house, flashed back into his mind. He must return to her. She might be in need of him at this very moment. The thought galvanized him into action, and he turned abruptly and ran to the door.

But here he halted.

"I wonder!" he reflected.

And was back at the detective's side in an instant.

Druce had possessed a revolver. A weapon would make all the difference in the world to Peter, and he felt in the dead man's pockets with an anxiously-beating heart. Druce's assailant, however, had done his work thoroughly. The revolver was gone.

Bitterly disappointed, Peter left the cottage and began to grope his way back to the house. He gave the first cottage a wide berth and took all the cover he could find. When he

neared the house, he made a long detour in order to avoid the open space that fronted it. And at last he found himself again under Angela's window.

There was no light now in the window. He approved of this, although a little anomalous pang of disappointment went through him. A light in a window is a most comforting, welcoming thing, especially when it betokens some particular presence; illumines not only the physical darkness, but the spiritual loneliness of the soul. He waited for a second or two, thinking that perhaps her listening ears might have caught the sounds of his approach and recognised them. In her place, he felt sure his own ears would have been tuned to such recognition. But no sign came from above, and he called softly.

"Angela!"

He waited for her reply. None came. A second time he called, "Angela!" He called a little more loudly, but dared not raise his voice much. Barren seconds went by.

"I expect she's asleep," he thought, while a little chill in his heart denied the expectation.

He tried once more; then, all at once, a bush moved near by. Something was creeping along behind it.

Whatever it was made no sign of having seen him, for the movement was continuous and unbroken. A sudden hope filled Peter's soul that this was Angela. He heard the faint rustle of a skirt, or, in his anxiety, fabricated the sound. But he must not call her name yet, or reveal himself until he was quite sure.

He crept towards the bush. When he reached it, the figure had passed on towards the back of the house, and he followed. He wound his way through outbuildings, strange and unfamiliar, though he might have recognised them well enough in the sunlight. Slowly, he gained on the figure. Yes, it was a girl—but, if it was Angela, she had shrunk amaz-

ingly. Again, disappointment swept over him. Then the figure disappeared into the blackness, and Peter paused.

He appeared to be in a little yard, but he could not place the spot. Should he go back, or go on? Perhaps this was a decoy, and, if he too disappeared into the blackness ahead of him, he would disappear for good, as others had done! The figure seemed to have disappeared into a little hole. Not very appetising. He hesitated.

And then voices came softly to him out of the little hole, and, recognising them, he slipped aside and listened.

"Thort yer was never comin'!" grumbled one. That was the voice of Freddie, the "boots"—alias Topliss.

"I come as quick as I can," whispered another. That was Lizzie, the kitchenmaid—alias Rose Dodd.

"Wot kep' yer?"

"I 'ad a nawful time!"

"Did they try an' stop yer, Liz?"

"They would 'ave, if I'd give 'em a chance."

"But you was too nippy!"

"You bet!"

"Well, then, wot kep' yer, Liz?" repeated Freddie. "I been waitin' 'ere weeks!"

"Go on! It was Miss Ayrton first. I 'ad ter see to 'er."

"You're always seein' to 'er! Wot's it orl about?"

"I said I wouldn't tell, Freddie."

"Yer can tell *me* all right."

"I wasn't to tell *no* one!"

"S'pose I go an ask 'er?"

"Wot—go back into the 'ouse? You're talkin' mad! And jest you remember, young man, that—well, look 'ere, I'll tell yer *something*, but I won't break my word to Miss Ayrton, not about the other, not till we're a long way off."

"You've got Miss Ayrton on the brain, Liz!"

"Go on! I *like* Miss Ayrton——"

Freddie interposed with an astonishing statement.

"Now, look 'ere, Liz, I'm torkin' straight," he said. "One day afore long, I'm goin' to take yer for better or worse. That's right, ain't it? Now, the worse is pickpocketin' and purses, ain't it? And we're goin' ter stop all that, too, ain't we? But if the worse was murderin', do yer think I'd take yer fer that, Liz? Not 'arf, I wouldn't. That's wot we're quittin' for—'cos we ain't as bad as that, and ain't goin' ter stand fer all wot's goin' on. We're goin' to set up an' be respeckable—any'ow, see 'ow it works fer a bit—and I won't 'ave you mixin' no more with people like Miss Ayrton——"

"D'yer want yer face smacked?" retorted Lizzie, with warmth. "If *I'd* been Miss Ayrton, I'd 'ave done 'im in, so there! And if you'll listen instead o' jawin' like a higgyramus, I'll tell yer wot I was goin' ter, and p'r'aps you'll change yer tune, Freddie! 'Oo was it said we'd cut out o' this to-night? Was it *your* idea? Play honest, now!"

"It was your'n," sulked Freddie, domineered by the feminine influence.

"Well, it *wasn't* me," said Lizzie, with a note of triumph in her voice. "It was Miss Ayrton!"

"Wot—*she* put the idea into yer 'ead? Miss Ayrton did?" exclaimed Freddie.

"Corse, she did! 'You children cut and run,' she ses——"

"Children!"

"I'm tellin' yer wot she *sed!* 'Cut and run,' she ses, ' 'cos, if yer don't, there's goin' to be a bloomin' bust up, and you'd better be out of it.' I ain't gettin' 'er ezack words. 'But ain't it all right about the Mayflower?' I ses. And then she ses, 'You keep away from Freshways,' she ses, ' 'cos then you'll 'ave a better charnce o' runnin' straight'——"

"Did you go and tell 'er you and I 'ad decided ter run straight?" interrupted Freddie, indignantly.

"Yes, I *did!*"

"Mug you are, Liz! Yer doesn't want ter go *torkin'* about it!"

"Mug yerself, Freddie. You *gotter* tell people, else nobody'll 'elp yer. And when Miss Ayrton 'eard that, then she ses ter keep away from Freshways. 'Wot about the others?' I ses. 'They'll 'ave ter look arter theirselves,' she ses. 'Wot about *you?*' I ses. 'You come with us,' I ses. 'No, I can't do that,' she ses, 'I gotter stay 'ere fer a bit. But yer'll want some money,' she ses. 'Wot 'ave yer got?' 'Thirty bob,' I tells 'er. 'That ain't enough,' she ses, 'and it's a shame, with so much in the 'ouse, you 'aven't got more.' And then she give me this—look!" There was silence for a few pregnant moments. Then: "*Now* wot 'ave yer got ter say about Miss Ayrton, Freddie?"

"P'r'aps she 'ad some reason fer killin' that bloke," muttered Freddie, none too steadily. "If she treats you and me like this, Liz—there *must* be a bit o' good in 'er. I s'pose, Liz—she's playin' straight?"

And then Lizzie made *her* remarkable statement.

"Yes, she's playin' straight," she said, slowly. "With us, any'ow. And that's one reason why I want ter quit the old game, Freddie, and see 'ow the new one works. I've been thinkin' lately—since that day yer kissed me—no, shurrup! I don't want no more of it now—I've been thinkin' that if people can't trust you, then you can't trust nobody—and then wot's the good of it orl? If you'd always played straight yerself, Freddie, yer'd never want ter keep on askin' if others is doin' it."

"P'r'aps yer right, Liz," answered Freddie. "We're goin' ter try it, any'ow. And now fer the bloomin' bunk!"

The voices ceased. Out of the hole, which was in reality Freddie's little kingdom, of which he would often think later with odd affection, crept the two little figures. Long before this, Peter had decided to cultivate their better acquaintance,

and he now stepped forward quietly, to intercept them. But all he got for his trouble was a couple of terrified gasps. In a flash, they twisted and scampered away like frightened hares.

"Well, anyway, I've learned something," thought Peter. "Lizzie and Freddie, neutral. Miss Ayrton—a murderess, but apparently with some excuse for her murder—and on our side. She appears to have used Lizzie well. But what's all this about Freshways, and the Mayflower?"

He groped his way to the wall, and, feeling along it, came to an opening. A back door, evidently. It must have been the door through which Lizzie had slipped out to join Freddie, and she had conveniently left it open. Without hesitation, Peter entered. The passage was in darkness, but ahead a faint light glimmered. Peter made his way towards it. Something sprang at him from the shadows, struck him on the forehead —and the faint light went out.

CHAPTER XXIX

TWO IN A CELLAR

FOR some while—Peter never knew exactly how long—he remained unconscious of the world around him. If the peace was blessed, it was not the form of peace he would voluntarily have chosen; and when at last he opened his eyes and began to edge back into reality, his first emotion was one of anger that he had been forced to waste so many precious minutes. Or hours? He had no idea.

Then another emotion swept over him with his returning consciousness. His anger turned to despair. He tried to move, and found that he was bound to a chair.

He could see little. The chamber in which he was imprisoned—a cellar, evidently, from its coldness and dampness—was for the most part in darkness, and the only illuminated portion was in a far corner. Here a beam from the late-rising moon had managed to struggle in through a high window, and Peter rested his eyes on the spot to assist his return to material things. It was something definite, something to fix on to. . . .

"Good Lord!" he murmured suddenly, galvanized all at once into complete wakefulness. "What's that?"

Something dark was protruding into an edge of the moonlight. At first Peter could not discern what it was, although the uncanny atmosphere suggested its nature. Then, as his eyes grew more accustomed to the conditions, and the moonlight became momentarily intensified, the shape took form, and became two feet bound as securely as his own.

"Is this John Elderly?" wondered Peter. "Is this where he's been moved to?"

As though in answer to his thought, a quiet voice came from the invisible end of the object—the end farthest from the feet.

"Good evening," said the voice. "I trust you are well, whoever you may be."

"Mr. Grinton!" exclaimed Peter, his head bowing as he recognised the voice.

"Not so loud, my dear sir, not so loud," murmured Mr. Grinton. "God bless my soul, am I not equally rejoiced—but note how I restrain my emotion. Yes, I am quite calm—quite calm." His quivering inflections belied his words, however. As a matter of fact, under cover of the darkness, the old professor was very nearly weeping.

"How did you get here, Mr. Grinton?" asked Peter.

"How did I get here?" repeated the professor. "How does one know? How does one know anything? I have had a most trying time—a most difficult time. You are the first sane person I have met since the earth turned topsy-turvy. You are alive, I take it? Good. Forgive me for asking. I am utterly confused, and I understand nothing. I have given up trying to understand. How wonderful it would be to smoke, would it not?"

"By Jove, it would!" agreed Peter.

"That would soothe the nerves. We are terribly dependent creatures, I fear, for all our science and inventions. Yes, mere children, as helpless as the flowers. They tell me Mr. Elderly is dead. Is that so?"

"I'm afraid he is," answered Peter, deciding to curb his own curiosity for awhile and to let the old man run on.

"Indeed? I suppose I should weep. But I am numb, my dear sir. I have no emotion left. Only the self-protective instinct, which causes me, you note, to use the lower registers

of my voice, and which is really, I imagine, at the root of all our emotions and so-called altruism. I am not sorry for Mr. Elderly, or for you. Just for myself. You do not agree? Perhaps you are right. Yes, I really think you are right. In a moment—God bless me—I fear I shall cry."

He was silent for a few moments. He did cry, unashamedly. Then his voice ran on again. Peter found himself oddly soothed by it.

"Now I feel better. Yes, much better. I find I am not so callous, after all. When I got back, they threw me into a cottage, after giving me something most filthy to drink. When I came to, I believe I went temporarily mad. I fought and shouted. Amazing strength I seemed to have——"

"I heard you shout," interposed Peter.

"No, did you? Well, I am not surprised. It never occurred to me that I could shout so loudly. Under provocation, one can astonish oneself. And then it occurred to me that I had better pretend to be dead just before the reality occurred. They were very rough, you see—yes, very rough. Upon my soul, my neck is only beginning to untwist, as it is. And while I feigned death—I am not conceited enough to imagine they believed me—I am a professor, not an actor—they brought me here, so that I could be kept under their immediate eye. Periodically, someone comes and prods me. And I pretend to die again. They will be here shortly, I have no doubt—no doubt at all. Have you ever had your neck twisted? It is a most interesting sensation. The most odd thoughts come. The thought came to me that I was cycling up a spiral staircase on flat tyres. Or was it down? Both ways, I think. Yes, both ways at once. I know you will forgive me for talking to you like this, but I have been very lonely, and though I may seem sound and robust to you, I am really in a most pitiable state. When they come again, you will have to pretend to be dead with me. Or, shall we say,

more accurately, nearly dead? The mouth slightly open is most effective. Oh, believe me, I am getting very cute. Tell me," he added, simply, "what is it all about?"

Peter almost laughed.

"What's it all about?" he answered. "My hat! It would take a year to tell, and even then I could only tell you bits."

"I would like some bits," said the professor pathetically. "Even the fewest morsels may save my sanity. I have tried Bolshevism, earthquakes, coal strikes, and the release of the atom. None truly fit. Just a word or two—some tiniest grain of sand that I may concentrate on in this infernal darkness and say to myself, 'Here is something solid'!"

Peter did his best. In a low voice, and with his ear strained for sounds, he related what he knew of the situation. And it surprised him, as he related the facts, how nearly complete they seemed to be:

John Elderly had disappeared. The entire staff knew how he had disappeared, and only the visitors were in ignorance. The exact form of the disappearance was doubtful, but it seemed clear that Elderly had been concealed in the farthest gardener's cottage, and that the root of the trouble was a hundred thousand pounds and an incriminating black list, for which a feverish search was at that moment proceeding.

One by one, the troublous personalities had been removed. Sir Julius had been kidnapped while trying to get into touch with the genuine police. The professor had been caught and bound and locked up. Peter and Angela had been locked in their room. And others, for less obvious reasons, had been put out of the way.

"Why Druce should have been killed, I don't know," said Peter, dealing with this point. "He, without any doubt, was a member of the bogus official army. Why the constable was

killed I don't know. Miss Ayrton was temporarily drugged when they feared that she would double-cross them—as, it appears, she is actually doing. Probably she nearly gave herself away this morning at some moment or other—nearly but not quite."

"There remains the workman you mentioned," interposed the professor. "What about him? Is he just a casual fellow who had to be kept here lest he should go off and blab?—dear me, what a term! I have not said 'blab' for years—or is *he,* do you think, a killer? And, then, here is another thing I would like to know. You say that these policemen are bogus policemen—members of the Greystones staff. There must be a somewhat elaborate wardrobe on the premises to supply the uniforms, eh?" he broke off. "Excuse me, but did you hear a sound?"

Peter listened, and heard nothing. "No, Mr. Grinton. I hear nothing. . . . Those uniforms are a bit puzzling, but perhaps they fit into a scheme in which a collection of obvious crooks assume a temporary mantle of respectability —of servants, in fact. Disguises must be an important part of the routine upon which Greystones exists, and probably there are disguises for all occasions."

"True," agreed the professor. "True. . . . My dear young friend, my ears are better than yours. Listen—someone *is* approaching. We must die quickly. Good-night."

He became limp and silent. Peter grunted disgustedly, but decided to follow his example. Now he, too, heard the noises outside.

Something whimsical entered into the professor as he lay there. Opening one eye, and with shocking lack of caution, he observed,

"What a joke this would be, eh, if it were only a game? Perhaps, after all, that is all it is, and we take life too seriously."

Then he quickly closed his eye again, and a moment later the door opened.

Someone stood in the doorway. Peter hoped the someone would merely glance around, and then leave them, but his hope was not fulfilled. The someone advanced, swiftly and quietly, and made for the spot where Peter sat bound to his chair.

What was going to happen now? It required all Peter's self-control to remain with his eyes closed, but he was helpless and had no power to defend himself even with open eyes, so he sat still and waited while the unseen person approached and bent over him. He felt breath upon his face, and then a hand upon his sleeve. Something cold touched his wrist, and he nearly gave way then. But the possibility of what that cold thing might do if he moved kept him motionless; and then, all at once, he sensed the abrupt withdrawal of the unseen person, and heard hurrying footsteps retreating to the door. But the cold thing—that remained against his wrist. . . .

The door closed. They were alone again for an instant—for an instant only. But in that instant Peter had opened his eyes, and had seen what the cold thing was; and before the door re-opened, admitting a new presence, he had wriggled it into a concealed but accessible spot, while his heart thumped loudly.

The second visitor did what Peter had hoped the first would do. He merely glanced around, satisfied himself that all was well, and went out again, closing the door after him. Then, with an almost hysterical chuckle of joy, Peter opened his eyes and called to the professor.

"Wake up," he whispered.

"I have done so," the professor whispered back.

"Did you keep your eyes closed all the time?"

"Tightly."

"Then you didn't catch a glimpse of the first person who came in?"

"Were there two?" queried the professor. "I fear I lost count."

"Yes, there were two. The second fellow was our jailer, but the first—I *wish* I'd seen who it was! He left a souvenir —look!"

Peter wriggled his hands and brought the cold thing forward.

"It's no good asking me to look," said the professor. "You are in absolute shadow from here. What is it?"

"A knife!"

As he spoke, Peter was already working the knife into position and sawing at his cords. The professor gave a little gasp, then fell silent. Who had brought the knife? And what, precisely, would they do when they had cut themselves free? Professor Grinton was wonderfully clever at botany, but at this sort of game he admitted he was a child.

He waited patiently while Peter freed himself, and a few moments later found himself free also. Before this, he had longed for freedom; now, he was not quite sure whether it was such a privilege. It entailed responsibility. One could not be dead any more.

"What do we do now?" blinked the professor.

"I am going to find Angela," replied Peter.

"And what do you suggest I shall do?"

Peter considered rapidly. Then he said,

"I don't think it will help matters to have you with me, Mr. Grinton. The two of us together would be sure to be discovered, but I may be able to slip up alone. After I've found Angela, I'm going to get her away from here—and Miss Ayrton, too, if I can manage it. Suppose we arrange a meeting place near the lodge gate? There's a little wood on the left of the drive, before the gate. Do you think you

could make it? I'll join you later, if I can, and then we'll make our bolt."

"You think we will be allowed to bolt?" asked the professor.

"It's a desperate plan," admitted Peter, "but things are getting too hot here altogether. And besides, I've got to rescue Sir Julius—and then I want to get the money and that black list into safe custody."

"It will be a delightful journey," mused the professor, "with rascals all around, and a hundred thousand pounds upon us. How much, by the way, does a hundred thousand pounds weigh?"

"Not so much, when it's in big notes," returned Peter. "When we've foregathered—and maybe our mysterious friend who gave us this knife will foregather with us, if I can trace him—we'll have quite a small army. Are you game?"

"Game? Oh, yes. Certainly. But perhaps you could just see me out of the house, so to speak," said the professor, nervously. "Then, perhaps, I could make for the wood."

Peter tiptoed to the door and listened. Then he nodded, and softly opened the door.

"All clear!" he whispered.

They crept along the passage, Peter wondering whether their jailer had forgotten to lock the door, or whether their mysterious friend had unlocked it. Groping their way, they found a stone stairway that mounted from the basement to the ground floor. A crack of moonlight gleamed somewhere. The back door through which Peter had entered was still half open.

"There's your way!" murmured Peter. "Bear round to the right, and you'll strike the drive."

"You mean, I am now to continue alone?" muttered the

professor. "I see. Quite so. Well, God willing, you will find me waiting for you in the wood."

He slipped forward, became silhouetted for a moment against the silver aperture, then vanished. Peter turned, and finding the back staircase within a few feet, crept cautiously up.

There were no lights, happily. The searchers appeared to be congregated in another part of the house. The moon however provided a little spasmodic illumination, and he reached the first floor without difficulty. It was deserted. He ran across the passage, and did not stop till he reached Angela's room. The door was open.

"Angela!" he whispered, entering.

No welcoming answer came back. He was about to cross to the bodroom, the door of which was ajar, when a half-sheet of paper caught his eye on the floor. It had lain in the shadow, but his foot had kicked it into a patch of moonlight. He picked it up, and the words he read froze him:

"Dear Miss Vernon,—I am slipping this under your door, because I cannot get in, and people are at my heels. Mr. Armstrong and Mr. Grinton are on their way to Dr. Glade's house, and we are to follow. I have accounted for Dr. Glade, by the way, and Sir Julius is waiting there for us, well and sound. When the coast is clear, I will knock, using the formula which Mr. Armstrong has passed on to me—three slow, three fast, and three slow. When you hear that, come out—you will find the door unlocked—*and bring what you and Mr. Armstrong found with you.* —H. Druce, Detective."

Signed by Druce—and Druce was dead!

Peter stared at the paper, dazed. He stared so hard that, at first, he did not hear a little noise at the bedroom door. Then he looked up sharply. The door was being pushed open.

CHAPTER XXX

THE WORKMAN

IN a flash Peter Armstrong was by the bedroom door, his body tense, his muscles steeled to strike. The anger in his soul—black unrelenting anger—and the agony in his heart would double the strength of his blow when it came. Science and control may direct one's strength, but at a given moment only passion can increase it. It is the emotion of the drowning man that causes him to perform the superhuman feat that saves him from his death. So Peter waited, with a maelstrom within him that would have staggered him could he have realised its potential force.

If Peter did not realise it, but was steeled merely in blind obedience to it, the person who was opening the door appeared to have greater knowledge. The door ceased moving, as slowly and as quietly at it had begun, and perfect stillness reigned for several seconds. Peter could see nothing; the aperture between the edge of the door and the door's frame was black; but the unknown person behind the door could either see Peter or catch a glimpse of his reflection in a mirror on the opposite wall behind Peter's back. And what was seen or glimpsed induced caution.

Then, softly, a voice spoke out of the blackness.

"Keep cool, Mr. Armstrong," said the voice. "A false move now may ruin everything."

The effect of the voice was to give Peter a momentary sensation of sickness. He had been prepared to grapple with some human devil, and like the devil himself was ripe to tear

his adversary limb from limb. The voice however was quiet and friendly, and it was the sheer reaction that caused the temporary nausea. A too sudden transition from cold to grateful warmth will produce dizziness, and one imagines that a man suddenly reprieved from the gallows must pass through some shattering moments.

But Peter did not relax his vigilance, despite the unexpectedly friendly tone of the voice. This might be a trap. And, even if it were not a trap, the agony of Angela's disappearance was still in his heart. Without moving and without speaking, he waited for the next step.

"I can see you are ready to strike me," the voice went on, after a pause. It was a pleasant voice, and unfamiliar. Peter was quite unable to place it, or to visualize the face of the speaker. "In that case, I should have to strike, too, and the very small number of law-abiding folk in this house would be further reduced in efficiency. May I trust you to keep your control while I enter?"

Already convinced, Peter nevertheless made assurance doubly sure.

"Prove to me first that this is not a trap," he said.

"I can indicate it, but I cannot prove it," replied the voice from the blackness. "It is impossible to prove anything finally in this very confusing world. One cannot even prove that death brings extinction. Risk is everywhere."

"Then let me hear your indication," retorted Peter. "I'm inclined to believe you, but I've taken all the risks I need lately."

"Do you remember, when you were bound in the cellar, someone gave you a knife? That was I. The only reason I did not cut you free myself was because somebody was at my heels, and there wasn't time."

"Good Lord—that's good enough, I think!" murmured Peter. "Come in!"

Now the door opened fully, and the workman entered.

"Geary!" exclaimed Peter.

"I have another name," answered the workman, with a faint smile. "Detective Jessop."

Peter held on to himself. Another detective! His suspicions began to return.

"A friend of Detective Druce's?" he asked, sharply.

"Druce was not a detective," replied the workman, calmly. "Please keep your voice a little lower. One moment." He crossed to the sitting-room door, glanced out, and closed it. "Druce was introduced as a blind—to keep you and others quiet. He, too, had another name—or, rather, several. But the name that will interest you most is that of Davis."

"The butler!" exclaimed Peter.

"I will stop telling you things if you speak so loudly," reproved the workman. "Yes, the butler. The butler who apparently disappeared, in order that the detective might arise. Davis played his part well, and his assumed distrust of the equally bogus inspector and the equally bogus constables, with whom of course he was actually working, was admirable. But then Davis was about the cleverest of the bunch—second only in cleverness to Mr. Elderly himself. No wonder he was chosen for the part——"

"Look here, I want to hear all these things," interrupted Peter, "but this isn't the moment. Angela—Miss Vernon—has gone, and my job is to find her. Do you know anything about *that?*"

Jessop shook his head.

"I don't know anything, excepting—and you can hang on to this—that a few minutes' delay isn't likely to make any difference to her, while a rash act may prevent you from finding her. There's a fellow at the end of the passage. There's another outside the window. We can't move for a

little, but we'll get busy the instant we can. Meanwhile—shall I go on? It may be helpful to you."

"Yes, yes—go on," groaned Peter. "But, I'm not going to stay here long. Why, good God, man—!" He broke off abruptly. "You're right—we mustn't be foolhardy. But, I warn you, if anything happens to Miss Vernon, you'll have to arrest *me* for murder before the night's out." He forced himself to be calm. "Well—so Druce was the butler, eh?"

"Yes. And it was also Druce who caused the earliest disappearance of John Elderly."

"What! You know that?" exclaimed Peter.

Jessop nodded.

"How did you find out?" demanded the young man.

"I was on the border of the discovery," replied Jessop, after a moment's hesitation, "when—an ally told me."

A flash of intuition flashed into Peter.

"Miss Ayrton?" he guessed.

"Yes, Miss Ayrton. It was she who told me that Davis, the butler—described at Scotland Yard as Gaynor, wanted for murder—quarrelled with John Elderly this morning, and killed him. It was she who also told me that Davis had caused her to send off the wires cancelling Elderly's invitations for the week-end, and that the policemen were sham ones—though, of course, I guessed that long before I was able to get into personal touch with Miss Ayrton. I sent her a note, through Lizzie."

"Then Miss Ayrton has been spying for you?"

"Yes."

"Why should she do that? Is she—white, among the black?"

There was a pause. A new look entered Jessop's eyes. But his voice was still calm and quiet when he spoke.

"To me, Mr. Armstrong, Miss Ayrton is purest white, and

always has been—and always will be. But—officially—perhaps you understand?"

"By Jove, I think I'm beginning to," murmured Peter. "I say—I like you, Mr. Jessop. Yes—I really think I do understand."

Now something warmer did enter into Detective Jessop's tone.

"I am sure you will understand when I put a question to you," he said. "Suppose Miss Vernon, in order to save her honour, killed—well, for the sake of argument—Inspector Biggs? And suppose it transpired that her defence would be difficult to prove, and that, in a moment of fear and weakness, she ran away, and found a hateful sanctuary? What would you do?"

"I'd hunt her to the ends of the earth," replied Peter, "to tell her that I believed in her, that I wanted to protect her and to remove her from that hateful sanctuary!"

"That is exactly what I have done," answered Jessop. "It is solely on account of Miss Ayrton that I am here."

Suddenly Peter's hand shot out.

"I reckon you're pretty good," he said. "Shake!" The detective gripped his hand. "But—look here—this other game that's on here—weren't you after that, too?"

Jessop did not reply immediately. He looked out of the window, then crossed to the door and listened.

"I suspicioned it, but that was merely incidental," he responded. "I had no notion when I arrived here this morning—and got an unexpected lift—that John Elderly had just been killed, or of the magnitude of the 'game.' And I even kept my suspicions to myself, when I had traced Miss Ayrton to Greystones and decided to come along, because I did not want to give any official information before I had interviewed Miss Ayrton."

"I see. And you weren't really drunk at all, I suppose?"

"No. That was just a useful pose to adopt. They thought I was a bona fide fool, and I was useful to have about as a sort of scapegoat for queer things that were happening. I believe our friend Biggs suggested that I had killed the constable outside the library window?"

"He did," smiled Peter.

"And he was right," said Jessop. "I did kill him." Peter stared. "I think it will ultimately be recorded as an official murder. The constable was too shrewd—he has murdered, also, in his time—and he found me out. I killed him in self-defence—with the knife he was about to use on me."

"I found the knife by a curtain," interposed Peter.

"Yes—I threw it there. Anywhere, to get rid of it."

"By Jove—then you killed Druce, too!" exclaimed Peter, suddenly.

"No, I didn't kill Druce," said Jessop, gravely. "That affair is a mystery to me. I haven't a notion who killed Druce—and I'd give a lot to find out," he added, frowning. "It seems that the original quarrel developed in the farther cottage. There, we may assume, Druce—or Davis, the butler—killed his employer, John Elderly. And there John Elderly lay. But, later on, John Elderly's body had been carted away, and his murderer's lay in his place. Where is John Elderly's body? And who killed Davis? Those are questions I can't answer yet—and the most baffling part is that they seem to be baffling everybody else, as well!" He glanced out of the window again. "That fellow's still there, but I believe he's going to move. Another two minutes, and then I hope we'll be able to move ourselves. But, before that, haven't you anything to tell *me?*"

"By God, I have," replied Peter, amazed that he had been content to listen so long; but what he had listened to had certainly been of interest. "Miss Vernon—I've got to tell you about *her.*"

And he briefly related the position.

The detective listened with attention. It was obvious from his expression that he, now, was learning things, though he did not interrupt with a single word during the whole of Peter's recital. Then he rose, and walked to the picture which concealed the secret panel. Two seconds later, the aperture was revealed—empty.

"So that's where it was!" he muttered. "And you found it—while the rest of us have been searching fruitlessly! The amateurs win this time, Mr. Armstrong——"

"Do they?" interposed Peter, his voice filled with bitterness. "One amateur has been duped into taking the stuff to Dr. Glade's! It must have been that person who was outside the room, and whom I fought with. He overheard us making the discovery, I expect—and now he's scooped the lot!"

"Well, you must go after Miss Vernon," answered Jessop. "We'll see now if the coast is clear."

"Are you coming, too?"

"I wish I could. But I've a job to finish here. A ship is waiting at Freshways to take our gang across the water—and I've got to see that certain arrangements I'm engineering prevent their going."

"By Jove—you're going to catch 'em there?" exclaimed Peter.

"Yes—I hope so."

"How about Miss Ayrton?"

"She'll have to go with them, or they'd smell the rat. That poor girl, Mr. Armstrong, has had a stiff game to play. Listen—this is our plan——"

And then an astonishing thing happened. Detective Jessop rose, and threw himself upon Peter.

The next moment, the passage door opened, and Inspector Biggs strode in.

CHAPTER XXXI

THE DOUBLE-CROSS

PETER was so utterly astounded by Jessop's sudden attack that, for a few moments, he found himself helpless. If the floor had collapsed, he would not have been more amazed. Indeed, the solid ground which he thought he had found at last did seem to have slipped from under him, leaving him in mid-air, gasping.

The inspector glared—glaring was his normal expression, according to Peter's experience—and then laughed shortly.

"Oh, so *that's* where he got to?" he exclaimed, and added, with a strong note of suspicion of his voice, "Ay, but how did you come to make the capture, Mr. George Geary?"

"For the obvious reason that I wanted him captured," answered the workman. "I happened to want him captured just as much as you did."

"Oh, that's interesting," retorted Biggs. "And may I know *why* you are so interested in the capture of this young man?" He broke off to address Peter, who was showing signs of revived energy. "Now then, you! Stay quiet! If you make trouble, *this* may have something to say!"

He produced a revolver. Peter decided, with rage in his heart, that passivity was the only possible policy.

"Why did I want him captured?" said the workman, and laughed. "Well, maybe for the same reason as yourself, Quinn."

"What's that?" roared Biggs.

"Quinn's your name, isn't it? Seems to me I recollect you

in a rather interesting robbery case in Bournemouth two years ago. I remember it, because I'd also got my eye on that nice little haul—only you nipped in first."

Quinn regarded the workman intently. He did not speak for a full minute. Then, still covering Peter with his revolver, and keeping a wary eye also on the workman, he backed a step or two into the passage. In response to a sign, two men joined him. Then they all entered the room, and Quinn closed the door.

"Now let's hear a little more about this," said Quinn, quietly. "And I may as well begin by telling you that, at the very first sign of trouble, this will go off." He touched his revolver. "I know how to use 'em. Now, then, Mr. George Geary, who the devil are you?"

"Call me Smith," suggested the workman. "It's such a nice, all-concealing name. And, as a matter of fact, it happens to be the name I set out with, years and years ago. But I'm afraid it's got lost once or twice since——"

"Hold hard—we don't want any conversational stuff," interrupted Quinn, angrily. "Just cut that right out. What are you here for? What's your game?"

"Once more, my game is the same as yours," answered the workman. "I say, you're a bit blind, aren't you? But—to be quite honest and frank—I've noticed your blindness all along."

"Didn't I tell you to cut the cackle?" cried Quinn.

"Yes, but I don't happen to be taking orders from you, or from anybody," answered the workman. "So you can put that in your pipe and smoke it. I came here to get a nice, soft job with Mr. Elderly—as I told you, you remember, when you overtook me on the road. I came for a job just as you came, I should reckon, some two years ago—say, after that Bournemouth affair—and as all the rest of them have come. What's so surprising in that? Mr. Elderly engaged many

more people than were needed to run his house, didn't he? His gardeners would have made a small regiment. And—well, I was just coming to swell the numbers."

"I see," murmured Quinn. "One of us, eh? That's your yarn?"

"Yes—one of you. Though not quite such a fool as most of you seem to be."

"Fool yourself! *You've* acted like one, if there ever was one," rasped Quinn. "Why didn't you tell us this before—*if it's true?*"

"For the simple reason that I *wasn't* a fool," answered the workman, calmly. "And if you think that little pea-shooter worries me, you're wrong. When I first met you, I thought you were *real* police. Naturally, I didn't confess who I was then. It wasn't likely I'd be communicative to constables. Then, when I found out what had happened, I wasn't in the least sure of my position. You see, Mr. Elderly wasn't about to introduce me—and you might have grown suspicious."

"We might," admitted Quinn, sarcastically.

"Exactly. But your very suspicions of me, Quinn, prove my sanity. The fool would have rushed in. I, wisely, feared to tread. Besides, some big game was on, and I wanted to figure it out for myself. If you were after anything, I wanted my share, and it wasn't likely you'd hand out a share to any stranger who came along. So I wandered about and pretended to be drunk, and watched as big a set of muddlers as I've ever come across, and put two and two together. It seems to me, Quinn, this little sanctuary for wanted criminals rather dulls the wits in time. It was madness to kill Mr. Elderly, in the first instance."

"Yes, but I didn't do that," interposed Quinn, quickly. "That was——"

He paused, and suddenly glanced towards Peter.

"Don't mind him," said the workman, smoothly. "I'm go-

ing to settle Mr. Peter Armstrong presently in a way that will render him quite innocuous. I don't believe in half measures—and that's been *your* trouble. Half-measures. Why, man," he went on, with suddenly blazing eyes, "think what you were after! And you went about it—all but one—like old ladies playing croquet!"

"You know a lot, don't you?" snapped Quinn, but it was clear he was impressed.

"Of course, I know a lot," returned the workman. "I make it my business to. I know as much as you do, Quinn—and just a bit more. I know what this place is, to begin with—a sanctuary where wanted folk go, when they've slipped the police, and live under disguises. I know that Mr. Elderly kept a pretty big wardrobe for that purpose—including plenty of police uniforms. I know—by deduction—that Mr. Elderly must have been a pretty hard man, and that he ground down those who sought his protection, and made a pretty big penny out of them. He's probably had a big bite of that Bournemouth affair, eh? And maybe you've worked for him a bit since?"

"What else do you know?" asked Quinn.

"I know that a situation of this kind can't last for ever, Quinn. That, when you live on the edge of a volcano, the volcano gets you in the end. And it got Elderly. As it's got you. Of course, Detective Druce, alias the butler Davis, or whatever other name he's got, did for Elderly. A quarrel, eh, over the spoil, or perhaps you all wanted to clear out, and he wouldn't let you? Anyway, Elderly was killed, and, with a house-party blossoming, it looked as though nasty enquiries would be made by the police when the matter became public. So you decided—correct me if I am wrong—that the matter should *not* be made public until you had found—how much?—something like a hundred thousand pounds, I think?

You satisfied the few people who had to be satisfied by inventing a sham police army, and by cutting the telephone wires, and by inventing a story of Mr. Elderly summoning the police by telephone just before the wires were cut. Now, *I* should have just gagged and bound the few people who weren't wanted, and left 'em to rot in a cellar. But, no, you chose half-measures, and all night you've been searching for what you haven't found even yet—dogged by these unwanted people till you don't know where you stand. The only one you really got rid of was Sir Julius Hughes, whom you handed over to a Dr. Glade. I confess, Dr. Glade is the one person I am a bit curious about. Who is he?"

"Don't know much about him," replied Quinn, gruffly. "A sort of a stand-by of Mr. Elderly's. Did odd jobs for him, I imagine, for a consideration. He hardly ever came here, though."

"Well, he's looked after Sir Julius better than you have looked after your own crowd, or the police would be on our track already. Barring Druce, alias Davis, you've been a pack of fools. And—" He paused, and smiled quietly. "Yes, even poor Davis got knocked out in the end, didn't he?"

"He did," said Quinn, his eyes narrowing. "Know anything about *that?*"

"Why, of course, I know something about that," replied the workman, still smiling. "I ought to. I was there when Davis was killed."

"What?" cried Quinn, and his two comrades glanced at each other.

"Yes, I was there," nodded the workman, and looked down modestly at the tip of his boot. "There were only two of us."

"You mean," gasped Quinn, "you—killed—Davis?"

"I told you, it's not my habit to mince matters," answered the workman. "That's why you needn't fear to talk before

our young friend here." He jerked his head towards Peter. "I killed Davis, and, when you hear why, you'll thank me for doing it."

"Well! Go on!"

"You never knew, did you, that Davis was double-crossing you?"

"What?"

"It's true. I discovered his game—you see, Quinn, I really *have* been busy, haven't I?—and, when he grew unreasonable, I settled him. I got him to show me John Elderly's body in the cottage, and I have no doubt he only consented because he thought he would kill *me* there. Only I was just a second or two quicker."

Quinn wiped his brow. He was mortified, depressed, but he could not withhold his admiration. Neither could he withhold his eagerness to hear the end of the workman's story.

"We only found Davis's body," said Quinn, thickly.

"I only had time to remove Elderly's. He is concealed effectively in some undergrowth—I love giving the police work, and the cottage was too obvious a place to discover him in. But time beat me, and I could not hide Davis, too. Besides—it struck me as rather sweet that Davis should lie in the place of the man Davis had killed. Don't you agree?"

"Oh, for God's sake, shut up!" exclaimed Quinn, nervously. The strain was beginning to show on him at last, and he was battling against a bigger personality; and also against fear, and greed, and the clock. "This double-cross you spoke of. Let's hear about that. How was Davis double-crossing us?"

The workman looked at Quinn without replying. He seemed to be enjoying the moment. There was, perhaps, something theatrical about the workman, for all his quietness. He led up to his points well, made them well, and held

them well. Now, he was hugging a moment which appeared to give him special delight.

"Quinn," he said, "how many hours have you been looking for that hundred thousand pounds?"

"Hours? You mean years!" retorted Quinn. His voice was hoarse. "But that wasn't all we were looking for."

"Oh! What else? A little black book?"

"By God, you know everything! Yes, a little black book, that described us rather too fully."

"Exactly. I'm surprised Mr. John Elderly survived so long," commented the workman. "I'd have killed him long ago, if *I'd* been here."

"Then, that time, you *would* have been a fool!" retorted Quinn, glad to make a point at last. "Elderly writes to his solicitor every day—his solicitor in London, whose name he never told us—and the first day the solicitor fails to get a letter, a sealed communication goes to the police! Now, then—what have you to say to that?"

"My hat off to Mr. Elderly," murmured the workman, reverently. "That was a stroke of genius. So none of you dared kill him, because his death would bring the police here, with instructions where to find the black book and your little inheritence? Yes—that really *was* a stroke of genius. I wish I had met John Elderly. He and I——"

"For heaven's sake, man, when are you coming to it!" burst out Quinn. "Davis—this double-cross——"

"Ah, of course," said the workman. "And I can understand your impatience, too—for John Elderly is dead—that sealed communication *will* go to the police—and, by to-morrow, you must have cleared out! Well, then—let me show you how Davis double-crossed you."

He walked to the wall, and Peter suddenly stiffened. He had been listening to the workman with an intensity that almost hurt him, noting his every inflexion, and watching his

every expression and movement with eyes that burned. Now his heart thumped against his ribs. What was going to happen next? He sensed a big moment coming.

The picture of the little boy peering in at the miser's cave had been replaced. Now the workman swung it aside, and worked the panel.

"Here!" muttered the inspector. "In Miss Vernon's room!"

"You forget—John Elderly was a genius," answered the workman. "But—look!"

He revealed the recess, with all its emptiness.

"Davis found it!" cried Quinn.

"Yes, Davis found it," answered the workman. "And I found Davis. And when I knew that Davis had sent what he had found to Freshways, and intended to follow when he had settled matters here and get away with the whole lot—well, one of us had to die, didn't we? For, you see—in that cottage, *Davis knew that I knew.*" The workman shrugged his shoulders, and closed the panel. "So I had to kill Davis, you see. And, unlike Davis, I decided to share my knowledge with you. I could have gone to Freshways myself, and have boarded the Mayflower with the prize—but I preferred not to. All I ask is to be allowed to take Davis's place among you—and, of course, his share."

"Man, you've earned it!" exclaimed Quinn. "But who are taking the stuff to Freshways? Who could Davis trust?"

"Children are proverbially innocent," said the workman, with a sardonic smile. "His messengers have no knowledge of the precious bundle they are carrying. If you search for Lizzie, the kitchenmaid, and Freddie, who I understand cleans the boots, you'll get your answer. They are certainly nowhere near Greystones at this moment."

Quinn gave an exclamation, and made for the door.

"Smith, or whatever your name is," he cried, "deal with this fellow here—I can trust you to—and then come along

with us. I'll tell 'em all your news, and we'll push off to Freshways this minute."

He left the room, and his two cronies after him. The workman took out a pocket-handkerchief, and wiped his brow, which had suddenly grown amazingly wet.

CHAPTER XXXII

THE CROWS' CONFERENCE

QUINN hurried along the passage with mixed sensations. The news he had just heard was of first importance, and there was no longer any ambiguity as to the course of action to be pursued. The fruitless, hopeless search would cease—a blessing, that, since time pressed. The journey across the hills to Freshways would begin. And in less than two hours, at the break of dawn, the good ship Mayflower, like a former ship of that name, would bear away a number of folk who were anxious to leave England and follow their fortunes in fresh fields.

Yes, all that was good. A feeling of relief pervaded Quinn. But vague little worries ran through his mind like teasing shadows in the sunlight.

Quinn was a crook, but not a super-crook. As second-in-command, he might never have muddled that little affair at Bournemouth two years ago, and might not have been forced to accept the sanctuary offered by John Elderly. Quinn had a greedy, jealous nature, however, and liked to lead. Quick to perceive follies in others, he was blind to follies of his own, and after the Bournemouth fiasco he had still nursed the secret notion that that bad luck, and bad luck alone, had tripped him up—whereas he had actually had remarkably good luck in not having tripped up before.

At Greystones, his ego had been further thwarted. He had hoped to become the cock of the walk, but two personalities had towered above him—Gaynor (the butler Davis) and

John Elderly himself. Gaynor possessed twice Quinn's brains, and it was only Gaynor's jealousy of Elderly—who possessed twice Gaynor's brains—that had precipitated that morning's sudden tragedy, and had thrown their little community into such abrupt confusion. Quinn (so Quinn told himself) would never have picked a quarrel with John Elderly until some definite plan had been evolved. As it was, the removal of John Elderly during one of his house-parties had produced temporary chaos. And who was it (asked Quinn) who had thought of the policemen's uniforms? True, Gaynor had formulated the precise procedure, had devised the story of Elderly's telephonic call for help, but the germ had been Quinn's, and Gaynor had never been entirely happy about it.

And now Gaynor, having failed to trust Quinn's ability as Inspector Biggs, and having slipped the reins into his own hands as Detective Druce, was dead, and he, Quinn, had those reins back again. This thought formed a considerable part of Quinn's present satisfaction. But the shadows refused to dissolve entirely. Quinn could not conceal from himself that he had not proved himself unerringly intelligent in this affair, or that he was even yet not absolutely satisfied with the way things were going. It was not he who had accounted for Gaynor. It was not he who had found the panel in the wall. Would this workman—this new fellow Smith—rise to wrest Quinn's leadership from him? The leadership which had been made possible through the removal of Gaynor and Elderly?

"I'll see he doesn't," muttered Quinn. "I'll use the fellow while I want him, and then . . ."

He carried his news first to Mrs. Catesby. She listened sceptically, and Quinn was nettled by her doubts.

"Do you think I'm a fool?" he rasped. "Smith's story fitted like a glove!"

"Mr. Elderly never told us Smith was coming," replied Mrs. Catesby.

"How long have you been here?" demanded Quinn.

"Three years. Why?"

"Well, I've been here two. You'd been here a year when I turned up—and did Elderly tell you *I* was coming?"

"That's true," admitted Mrs. Catesby. "He didn't."

"Of course, he didn't. Sometimes he told us, and sometimes not. That was his way, wasn't it—to keep us uninformed, to keep us in doubt! He was close, and never shared his knowledge with anybody unless he chose to. So why shouldn't this man Smith have been due? And, you forget—he was lamming into Armstrong when I entered the room, and had him on the ground."

Quinn over-painted the picture, to give extra force to his argument. Mrs. Catesby considered the point, then branched off to another.

"And you believe Freddie and Lizzie are at Freshways now, with the money?"

"Either there, or on their way. Gaynor would have selected them, because they would have been easiest to deal with ultimately. That's plain, isn't it? Anyway, we can easily prove that. If they're still about the place, then Smith was lying."

"It will be wise to prove it. But let's question Miss Ayrton first. There's been something up between those two. We'll go to her room."

"Well, Miss Ayrton's got to be told, like the rest," said Quinn, frowning. "I'll question her at the same time, if you like."

"No, I'll do the questions, if you don't mind," responded Mrs. Catesby. "You listen to her replies, and watch her expressions. She's sly, that girl. I'm not sure of her even yet!"

Quinn gave an exclamation of annoyance.

"No, you never will be sure of her," he exclaimed, "though she's been hunting with us all the evening, and has been as enthusiastic as anyone. It was *you* upset her," he went on,

contemptuously. "Just because you thought she recognised the workman when he first turned up. Of course, she grew stubborn, the way you treated her! I'll tell you something, Mrs. Catesby—you're jealous of Miss Ayrton—you always have been! Jealous of her looks, and of Gaynor's interest in her. And, but for you, we should never have had any trouble with her at all, and she'd have been with us right from the start."

Mrs. Catesby kept her self-control, but Quinn noted the momentary spasm of rage that flashed into her eyes.

"Oh—so I'm jealous, am I?" she answered, quietly.

"As a cat. Personally, I'm surprised Miss Ayrton didn't collapse before, with all she's gone through."

"Oh, she's found a new champion, has she?" commented Mrs. Catesby.

"Maybe," returned Quinn.

His own answer surprised him. He had never thought constructively about Miss Ayrton until this moment. Gaynor had regarded her as his property, and the only person who had disputed his case was Miss Ayrton herself. Now Gaynor was out of the way, perhaps . . .

Quinn's imagination grew lively on his way to Miss Ayrton's room. Yes—he must certainly settle with the workman, Smith, when the right moment came. Possibly with Mrs. Catesby, too, if she grew troublesome. Then, with Miss Ayrton, he might rule very happily over the little community. He would have to find some way of controlling the purse, though. You couldn't hold the reins unless you also held the money! . . .

"Don't forget," said Mrs. Catesby, in his ear. "*I'm* doing the questions."

She opened the door of Miss Ayrton's room. Miss Ayrton turned quickly. A smell of burning paper was in the air.

"What are you doing?" demanded Mrs. Catesby, sharply.

"Burning a paper," replied Miss Ayrton, after an instant's pause.

"What paper?"

Miss Ayrton returned Mrs. Catesby's gaze unflinchingly, to the latter's annoyance.

"I don't admit your authority to question me," answered the girl, "and I'm not in the least afraid of you, Mrs. Catesby. Mr. Quinn—who is wiser than you are, and doesn't jump to foolish conclusions—will look after me, I am sure, if you try any more tricks on me." She turned towards Quinn, who flushed with pleasure at her words. "Am I right, Mr. Quinn, or not?" she asked.

"Damn right," nodded Quinn, and smiled at her.

"Then perhaps you'll tell Mr. Quinn what paper you just burned?" suggested Mrs. Catesby, regarding the smouldering ashes in the grate.

"With pleasure." She addressed Quinn. "Yesterday afternoon, Mr. Elderly dictated a few notes regarding Mrs. Catesby and her peculiar capacity for mixing drinks. It was a little habit of his, and I think he used to do it out of sheer malice, to keep me in order."

"Sounds quite like him," grinned Quinn.

"I never transcribed notes of this kind, but I always burned them up. It seemed to me there would be no need to leave the note on Mrs. Catesby behind."

A little corner of paper had escaped the fire. Mrs. Catesby stooped, and picked it up. It was undoubtedly shorthand—that Mrs. Catesby could recognise. What she did not recognise, having no capacity to, was that the shorthand had been written by the workman, not by Miss Ayrton, and that this was a fragment of a letter delivered to Miss Ayrton by Lizzie, the kitchen-maid.

She gazed at the little corner of paper; then, as she tore it into smaller fragments, suddenly shot out,

"By the way, I suppose you've heard that our precious workman, Mr. George Geary, has confessed?"

If Miss Ayrton's heart beat any faster at this announcement, she did not show it.

"What has he confessed?" she asked, quietly. "That he is one of us?"

"Ah, you knew it?" exclaimed Quinn, while Mrs. Catesby glared at him for his interruption.

"I knew that a new member was expected shortly," answered Miss Ayrton. "After all, you must remember, I *was* Mr. Elderly's secretary. I even thought this might be he, but I didn't see any necessity to mention my theory, after the way I'd been treated. Besides, I merely guessed that it might be Smith."

"Smith!" cried Quinn, with a triumphant glance at Mrs. Catesby. "There's the fellow! Now, how about your doubts, Mrs. Catesby? I think it's full steam ahead, this time."

Mrs. Catesby snapped her lips, and Miss Ayrton looked enquiring.

"Come down to the library," said Quinn, "and we'll have a short conference. I dare say you're a bit mystified, Miss Ayrton, but there's no need to tell the story twice over."

They went below; and, after Quinn had rounded up his forces, and had noted the absence of Freddie and Lizzie, he gave a brief recital of the position. His audience listened in silence, saving when they learned that Gaynor had tried to double-cross them. Then there were exclamations of anger, and of satisfaction that Gaynor had met his deserts.

"I reckon this fellow Smith deserves his share!" cried someone.

"Yes—that's right enough," agreed Quinn, rather grudgingly. "Still, there'll be no harm in seeing that it isn't too large a share, eh?" There was a general laugh. "And, of course," he added, watching his audience closely, "if any-

thing *did* happen to Smith when we boarded the Mayflower and knew everything was in order—well, it would make our own shares just so much larger."

A short silence followed this sinister suggestion. Then the man, who had been known at Greystones as Foulard, most admirable chef, demurred.

"We 'ad bettaire go slow on zat stuff, hein?" he observed. "If we once start making biggaire our own share—ze good God 'imself, 'e cannot say where we stop. Hein?"

"That's right," agreed a man in gardener's corduroys. "We gotter 'ang together."

"'Ang togezzer? My fois! I 'ope not!" cried Foulard, and a grim little chuckle ran round the room. "But zere is one man per'aps 'e need not 'ang wiz' us," the Frenchman went on. "Ze doctaire Glade. 'E is—what you say—outsider, hein?"

"No, there's no need to include Dr. Glade in our party," responded Quinn. "He's four miles off, and we can't wait to collect him. Personally, I'm not dead nuts on Dr. Glade. Elderly never told us much about him, and there's no need for him to butt in that I can see."

"What about Fox?" came the question.

Fox was the chauffeur who had driven Sir Julius Hughes to the doctor's house.

"We can't wait for him, either," said a soft voice behind them. "We want to start this minute, or we'll be too late."

They swung round. The workman stood in the doorway.

"Hallo—you slipped in quietly, didn't you?" exclaimed Quinn, nervily.

"I do everything quietly," replied the workman. "I settled Phelps quietly, when he grew too troublesome. I settled Gaynor quietly." He turned to Quinn. "And I've settled Mr. Peter Armstrong quietly. It's a little habit of mine."

CHAPTER XXXIII

ACROSS THE HILLS

NO stranger procession had ever passed out through the little gate by the gardeners' cottage, and no stranger journey had ever started from that spot.

Darkness might have suited the travellers better, although there was little likelihood that they would meet any curious eyes at 3 A. M. in the morning. But the moon insisted that this unique pilgrimage should not proceed unilluminated, and the pilgrims stood out starkly upon the mercilessly whitened hills. One or two of them shuddered. Reaction was setting in, and they wondered whether the four miles ahead of them would provide peaceful travelling, and whether smooth moments awaited them in the little harbour at Freshways.

There was a noticeable absence of policemen in the little band, yet the number of the band had not diminished. The policemen's uniforms had been stowed away in an attic, among other unfamiliar costumes that had seen their uses, and the superficial appearance of the travellers was that of an army of workmen trudging off to their early morning labours. The packets and parcels which they carried, however, did not contain the customary workman's lunch. They contained the complete worldly possessions of their bearers. Any further possessions not upon them would be left behind for ever.

Two conspicuous figures stood by the gate as the procession passed through into the hills. One was the figure of Quinn, the other of Jessop.

"I should have thought you'd have taken the lead," remarked Jessop to Quinn.

"Mrs. Catesby is quite happy to be the pilot," replied Quinn, dryly, "and I reckon they most of 'em know the way."

"Taken it before, eh?"

"Some of them have. But, for the most part," added Quinn, with a short laugh, "we never made it a habit to travel far afield."

"I can imagine not," agreed Jessop. "A pity I arrived just when the little community had to be broken up. I should have enjoyed a bit of a rest here, I think."

"Rest? That's good!" exclaimed Quinn, and laughed again. "Say, would you consider it a rest to sit on a seat by the side of a volcano?" He pointed to a sour-faced fellow who was just shuffling through the gate. "He's called Jenkins here, but his real name's Tilson. When he first came here, he nearly wrecked the place. But for Gaynor—Gaynor and me—it would have been burned down. That sort of thing, you know—on the edge of it, all the time. Well, the bust-up's come, at last, and maybe it's as well."

"Tilson," repeated Jessop. "I think I remember the name. Killed an old man in a garret, didn't he?"

"He did. And there goes another beauty. Name of Last here, and Wragg elsewhere. *He's* wanted for a bit, I can tell you! We had trouble with him first, too."

"And Mrs. Catesby?"

"Baby-farming in Yorkshire. Her name was Sterndale till she had to change it. Then Miss Ayrton—she killed a man who got rather too fond of her. I reckon—but for that—some others of us down here might have shown her a little affection, eh? She's the sort that'd drive one to anything."

"Indeed," murmured Jessop, and his eyes narrowed a little. "Yourself, for instance?"

Quinn smiled unpleasantly.

"There's no telling. Maybe I know what I want—and how to play my cards."

"I see," said Jessop, quietly. "And you want Miss Ayrton?"

Quinn waited a second before replying. Miss Ayrton was just passing through the gate. His eyes drank her in with sudden greed and coarseness. Then he turned to his companion, and studied him.

"Smith," he said, abruptly, "before I give you any confidences—are *you* a lady's man?"

"Not to the extent of following any pretty face, Quinn," replied Jessop. "There's only one woman in my mind, and I met her before I ever set eyes on Greystones."

"That's good enough," answered Quinn. "Then you won't interfere with my own plans about Miss Ayrton. In fact, I dare say you'll help me. You see, Smith, I've not known you long, but it's clear to me that you and I represent the only real brains in this little party. If you'll back me—and keep off Miss Ayrton—I'll make you my second-in-command, and see that you get a fat share for it. Is it a go?"

"Sounds interesting," said Jessop, calmly. "We might talk more about it when we're on the Mayflower. Who's that French chap—Foulard?"

"Oh, our chef!" grinned Quinn. "He's spoken with a French accent so long he can't get rid of it. But he cooked for English Tommies in the war—only because he couldn't get out of it—and he's wanted for desertion."

"Is that all?" queried Jessop.

"Not by a long shot! He's cracked a few cribs since, and can open a safe better than anybody I know. It was he who opened the safe in the library——"

"And found it empty."

"Yes. That was one of Elderly's cynical tricks. He knew

we'd go for the safe in the library, so he hid the stuff in his niece's sitting-room—damn him!"

"Yes, Elderly had one on you there," said Jessop.

"Well, and I had one on *you* in the library," retorted Quinn. "You didn't know that safe had been opened, did you, till you got at the truth from Gaynor? I didn't mean you to know. We'd combed the library thoroughly—every corner of it—before I allowed you to stay there and poke around for yourself! You were there a hell of a time, weren't you? Well, it kept you busy. You must have been searching that library this evening for hours—all on your lonesome, eh?"

"Bit shabby, wasn't it?" sugested Jessop.

"Go on! Why? I didn't know then who you were! Why you stayed there so long beats me!"

Jessop smiled. Quinn would have been considerably ruffled had he known why the man he was talking to had stayed in the library so long. Jessop had been very well occupied.

"Well, well," rasped Quinn, suddenly. "There goes the last of them. Come along—let's be stepping ourselves."

"Right," said Jessop.

They passed through the gate, and Quinn closed it with a click. A few paces beyond, he turned, to take a last look at Greystones.

It stood silent and deserted. No light glimmered from its windows. It appeared a dead thing, with the ghosts already busy.

"Any regrets?" queried Jessop, watching Quinn curiously.

Quinn continued to stare at the house for a few seconds, then turned and looked ahead into the moonlit valley, till his eyes rested on the neat silhouette made by Miss Ayrton's figure.

"None at all," he answered; and, turning his head for one final look at Greystones, he cried jeeringly, "Good-bye!"

They fell into step, in the rear of the procession. Four miles in front of them was Freshways, and the sea. Suddenly Quinn spoke.

"None at all!" he repeated, harshly. "I reckon we were getting sick of it—the lot of us! I'm ready for a bit of adventure."

"You've had plenty, I should imagine," replied Jessop.

"As much as most," admitted Quinn. "But I'd like something new."

He glanced again towards the black silhouette of Miss Ayrton. They were catching her up. Wonderfully striking she was! A splendid mate for a man! With her by his side—and Quinn swore he could tame her—and, say, a quarter of that hundred thousand pounds—or why not half?——

"I dare say you'll get something new," Jessop's voice intruded on his thoughts. "Ever killed a man, Quinn?"

Quinn started slightly. Queer fellow, this!

"*You* have," he parried.

"I've removed a few obstacles in my time," said Jessop. "I've an idea you aren't a killer yourself. That's why I asked the question."

"I can kill if I want to, don't you worry!" responded Quinn, quickly. "I've got something in my pocket at this moment that's just made for it."

"The things we could do are different from the things we do," observed Jessop. "They found an old man dead in the little Bournemouth affair. The local doctor thought he'd died of fright—heart failure. I suppose he was right. You couldn't kill a chicken—you could only scare it."

"What are you getting at?" demanded Quinn. "If you want to know, that local doctor was a fool! I killed the old fellow. I had to. He was giving the alarm."

"I see," answered Jessop, quietly. "So you're really wanted for murder, too."

"Shut up," rasped Quinn. "Maybe I'll be wanted for another in a minute."

Ahead of them, Miss Ayrton stopped, and bent over her shoe. It had apparently come unfastened. They caught her up.

"Want any help, my dear?" asked Quinn.

"No—please go on," replied Miss Ayrton.

Jessop linked his arm in Quinn's and pulled him forward.

"What's the hurry?" enquired Quinn.

"No particular hurry, only you don't choose your moment's well," answered Jessop. "She's not in a mood for gallantry. If you want to win her, Quinn, don't press your attentions upon her at all times, without discretion."

"Hello—you know something about women, eh?" exclaimed Quinn.

"More than you do, evidently," returned Jessop. "For one thing, I'd never let a woman lead a procession of this sort. If you don't take the lead soon, you'll have trouble with Mrs. Catesby."

Quinn was impressed. This fellow would be useful! Yes, he was quite a sagacious bird.

"I think you're right," he conceded. "I'll just pop along and see how things are going at the front."

He hurried on, but Jessop did not alter his pace. Behind him, Miss Ayrton had suddenly disappeared.

Five minutes later, Quinn came back.

"Yes, you *do* understand women," he said. "Mrs. Catesby is on her high horse, and thinks she's a sort of general."

"Hope you took her down," replied Jessop. "If not—" He paused.

"What?" asked Quinn. He rather liked listening to his companion's theories.

"Well, she'll gather the most troublesome people under her banner—the people who are jealous of *you*—and they'll

trip you up. After which, they'll trip her up, and there'll be chaos. I tell you, with a hundred thousand pounds in the offing, and a desperate hole to get out of, a strong man's needed at this moment, Quinn. And now's *the* moment to fix the idea."

About to reply, Quinn paused.

"Where's Miss Ayrton?" he asked abruptly.

Jessop stopped. A blank look spread over his face.

"Haven't you seen her?" he enquired.

"No, I've not!" snapped Quinn. "Haven't you?"

Jessop shook his head.

"She didn't overtake me, now you mention it, after doing up her shoe," he frowned. "This is a nuisance! A domineering lady at the head, and a run-away at the tail——"

"What! Do you think she's run away?" exclaimed Quinn, angrily.

"Obvious, isn't it? That shoe business was a blind. She's run back to Greystones—she may even have ideas of turning King's evidence."

"God!" growled Quinn. "I'll go after her."

"Don't be a fool, man," retorted Jessop. "Am I to do *all* the thinking? If you go back now, you'll lose your grip on all these fellows. They'll get out of hand. I may as well tell you that Mrs. Catesby's a real danger, and has some plot or other on. You've got to go to the front, and play your part there. Firmly, Quinn! Don't stand any nonsense!"

"Yes, but Miss Ayrton——"

"I'll go after her. She probably hasn't gone far. If we don't overtake you, just wait on the boat till we appear. She'll do what I say, don't worry!"

Quinn looked worried. Jessop's plan seemed logical. Still, he didn't like it. For a moment, he stared at Jessop, trying to read his soul; but Jessop's soul was masked, and a shout ahead of them diverted Quinn's scrutiny.

"There's your chance," said Jessop, quietly. "A quarrel. Go and settle it. And let 'em all see your gun."

"Hell!" muttered Quinn, and hurried forward. But over his shoulder he shot a parting injunction: "See you bring her along damn quick!"

Jessop watched the ungainly figure lurch away, and listened to the squabbling voices. There would be plenty of that. Then, quietly, he turned, and walked back to Greystones.

He did not overtake Miss Ayrton on the way. Though he hurried, she reached the silent house first. A single light told him where she was. The light shone through the library window.

Half-a-minute later, he was in the study. Miss Ayrton was by the telephone, and looked up quickly when he entered.

"You were quick!" she exclaimed, breathlessly.

"So were you," responded Jessop. "Well done. Shall I do the talking?"

She handed him the receiver. If Quinn could have visualized the scene in the library at this moment, he would have been even less serene than he was. Moreover, he would have understood why the man he had permitted to search the library fruitlessly was content to remain there. Jessop had not wasted his time. He had brought all his technical knowledge into play, and had re-established communication with the outside world.

"Who is that? Rudd?" he called, a few moments later. "Jessop speaking. What's the position?" A silence. Then: "Good. Your men are already on the boat? Then our fellows will walk right into it. Sorry you can't be there, Rudd, to see the fun. Expect there'll be some sport. But you've been as slick as an American over this, and you'll be mentioned in dispatches with the rest. Now I've another job on. Can you spare any men . . . What? Not one?" A silence. "Well, that's a pity. You'll have to rake up somebody from some-

where. It's rescue work this time—and, incidentally, the securing of the prize. . . . Yes, yes—I'll hold on."

He stopped speaking, and turned towards Miss Ayrton. She was eyeing him gravely.

"Is this—quite fair?" she asked, in a low voice.

"I know how you're feeling," he answered, and his voice was as quiet as hers, "but it's the only kind of justice I can understand. A girl who defends her honour and, in the process, loses her head, doesn't automatically become the natural associate of criminals—nor does she deserve a criminal's fate."

He turned to the receiver again. "Yes, Rudd—I'm still here. No one. No one at all? Then I must go alone. But listen, just in case you are able to rout out a strong arm or two. You know Dr. Glade's house . . . ?"

CHAPTER XXXIV

A RESCUE PARTY

PROFESSOR GRINTON waited patiently in the little wood by the lodge gate. Patience was one of his outstanding virtues, and it was said of him that if he were sufficiently interested in a plant or a flower, he would stay and watch it grow. Nevertheless the professor admitted to himself that he had never found patience harder to achieve than in that eerie wood.

After parting from Peter Armstrong, he had gained the wood by slow and painful processes, darting from spot to spot, slipping from shadow to shadow, and always with an uncomfortable sensation that some fiery ogre was following him. Since he had sowed his mild wild oats, very many years ago, his life had been calm and serene, and all his thrills had been botanical; but now, to his humiliation and amazement, he discovered terror creeping upon him, and taking possession of him. He recalled long-forgotten nightmares of his childhood, a mythical tiger which his nurse had insisted, when he was naughty, lurked under his bed, and a farmer who had once chased him to regain some stolen apples. Now, once again, he felt very like that little boy of long ago. The protection of calm maturity and professional position was gone, and he was a prey to every little breeze that blew and every little leaf that stirred and whispered.

"It is odd," he reflected, in the midst of his terror. "I did not feel like this at first. I was quite bold, I recall, when those policemen went for me. I believe I hit one of them." He held

up his right hand, and it trembled. "To think that this jelly-fish of a hand hit a policeman! Well, well, I expect fear grips you gradually when you are not used to it. In the first shock, I could not quite believe it. But now it has certainly gripped me. My mind goes on functioning, but my body . . . Good God, what's that?"

He leapt round, and stared into the shadows. A baby fox would have swelled with pride had it realised how thoroughly it had scared a full-sized human being!

The minutes slipped by. There was nothing to do but to wait. The boy had stood on the burning deck, and the professor must stand in the whispering wood. After all, he was safer here than outside. If he left his little sanctuary, anything might happen!

Presently he started again. This time, it was no little fox. Somebody, without any doubt, was approaching.

"Do I stay still, or do I hit?" wondered the professor. "I wish I knew a little more about this game."

He adopted the former policy, and it was as well. The person who was approaching was capable of hitting much harder than the professor. The bushes parted, and a figure slipped through. Then it paused.

"Mr. Grinton!" came a soft whisper.

Life grew instantly rosier. It was Peter's voice.

"I'm here," chattered the professor. "One moment—I feel faint! There, there, now it is all right."

He advanced, and touched Peter's shoulder. This evidence of the material was infinitely pleasant.

"You've been a long time," said the professor.

"Yes—things have been happening," answered Peter. "But let's get out into the road first—then we'll talk."

"Oh—we are to go out into the road?" murmured the professor. The wood, perversely, had now become rather dear to him.

"Yes. We've got a journey. Feel all right for it, sir?" replied Peter.

"I do not think it is really possible to feel right for anything, in the circumstances," said the professor. "But I expect I am right enough—yes, right enough."

"For the Lord's sake, don't be academic!" murmured Peter, smiling faintly. "We've got to pretend we feel right, even if we don't."

"In that case," responded the professor ironically, "I feel perfectly magnificent. Hey—look out!"

He ducked swiftly, while a bat floundered over his head.

Peter took his arm, and, without more words, led him gently out of the wood into the drive. Across the stretch of gravel the lodge loomed black and silent. The white gate, as they approached it, was brilliant in the moonlight.

A queer sensation swept over Peter as he swung the gate open. Some sixteen hours previously, he and Angela had stood at this spot, and had discussed a walk. The walk had not materialized, and, ever since, the gate had formed an impassable barrier. Now, at last, he was about to find himself outside.

How long was it, he wondered, since Angela had preceded him through the gate? And what condition had she been in when she had gone through? His soul suddenly turned sick, and the professor felt that hand on his arm grip him more tightly.

"What's the matter?" asked Grinton, nervously.

Peter replied when they were outside, and the gate had swung to behind them.

"I was thinking of the job ahead of us," he said. "It's—it's going to be a stiff one, I'm afraid."

"Dear me," murmured the professor. "I thought—" He paused. A thought occurred to him. "Where are the others?"

he enquired. "Weren't you going to bring along Miss Vernon, and——"

"Miss Vernon has already left," interposed Peter, bitterly. "Our job, Mr. Grinton, is to rescue her."

In a low voice, as they hurried along, he briefly related the new developments, and the professor listened tensely. The prospect of visiting Dr. Glade's house was not in the least appetising, but a little spark of secret heroism began to kindle when the professor heard of Angela's danger. He *could* have got away with those apples, he recalled, but he had modified his pace to that of a less fleet companion. And he *had* hit a policeman! However unappetising Dr. Glade's house seemed, they would undoubtedly have to go there. Yes, undoubtedly.

"How many people do you suppose will be there?" he asked. "I mean, of course, in addition to Miss Vernon and—one assumes—Sir Julius?"

"We can only guess at that," returned Peter. "In addition to Dr. Glade himself, there are two possibilities we know of. The fellow who drove Sir Julius over—his name, I understand, is Fox—and a nurse."

"Would the nurse be male or female?" queried the professor.

"Female, I imagine," replied Peter, smiling. "But, somehow, I picture her as a rather hefty lady. And, as I say, there may be others about."

"So it comes to this," said Professor Grinton, after a short silence. "You and I have got to force our way into a house where there are two prisoners, and three people—at least three people."

"The odds might be worse," Peter pointed out.

"Oh, yes, that is true," nodded the professor. "I might be here alone. Tell me, Mr. Armstrong—my mind is a little

on the spin—you now believe that—that workman fellow you speak of is a genuine detective?"

"I'm sure of it."

"Certainty is difficult, my dear sir, at all times, and how you can be certain——"

"I'll tell you why I'm certain," interposed Peter. "It's because he has *proved* himself an ally. It was he who gave me that knife in the cellar, you know, that enabled you and me to get free. His account of himself was quite convincing up in the sitting-room, after I left you. And although I got a shock when he suddenly pounced upon me, and when he told quite a different story to Quinn, he was only bluffing Quinn—as he had to—and, I must say, that second false story of his was a stroke of genius! Why, he's set them all off on a wild goose chase to Freshways, where they'll walk into a beautiful trap and be caught as they deserve."

"But how did he prepare the trap?"

"By the simple device of repairing the telephone. Why, he even worked the absence of Freddie and Lizzie into his story—a neat touch, that. He thought of everything."

"No, not quite everything," demurred the professor. "He did not think how useful it would be if he had come along with us."

"Didn't he?" retorted Peter. "Yes, he did, and we discussed all that when Quinn had gone downstairs. But he and Miss Ayrton had to start with the procession to Freshways, to give the thing a convincing air. They're going to try and get back, however, so we may have Jessop along to help us yet."

The professor stopped walking for an instant. "Should we wait for Detective Jessop, do you think?" he suggested.

"You can, if you like," responded Peter, "but I'm not waiting for anybody!"

"Quite right, quite right," murmured Grinton, sadly, and

moved on again. "All the same, if you will permit me, there is still one point in which Detective Jessop has yet to prove his complete ability. Does he know where John Elderly is?"

"He doesn't," admitted Peter, frowning. "And—it really is rather odd that although any number of mysteries have developed and been cleared up, the first mystery of all—John Elderly's whereabouts—is still unsolved!"

"And also who killed the fellow who *pretended* to be a detective—that fellow Druce," added the professor. "I suppose Jessop didn't *really* kill him, eh?"

"Jessop assured me that he didn't," answered Peter, "although he *did* kill a constable, and although he told Quinn he'd killed Druce, too."

"Then who did kill Druce, if Jessop didn't?" demanded Grinton.

"If my theory is correct," responded Peter, slowly, "you and I are soon going to see that man."

This theory was so unpleasant that the professor fell into a silence, and they spoke no more until they came to the lane that wound round to the left and led to the doctor's house. On the point of turning into it, Peter suddenly paused.

"What's the matter?" whispered the professor.

"Sh!" whispered Peter, and drew the professor into a shadow.

The professor strained his eyes, and followed Peter's gaze. Along the lane ahead of them, walking towards Greystones, were two figures.

Grinton's momentary agitation was followed by a wave of relief similar to that he had experienced in the small wood, when Peter had appeared. Even in his abnormal condition, he quickly realised that these two figures were quite unsinister. They were small—almost pathetically small. They walked slowly and rather wearily, their strides unmenacing.

"The truants!" exclaimed Peter, in a low voice, as he

recognised them. "It's Freddie and Lizzie, who ran away! Wonder what they're coming back for?"

As the little figures approached, Peter suddenly stood out in the road. The figures jumped violently.

"Gawd!" gasped the male figure.

"Lummy!" gasped the female.

"Don't be alarmed," said Peter, pleasantly. "I don't really think there's any need for any of us here to be afraid of each other."

Freddie and Lizzie eyed Peter carefully, while they recovered themselves. Meanwhile, Peter continued his reassurances.

"The Greystone cat is out of its bag—or very nearly out," he went on, "and you can take it from me, young man and young woman, that Mr. Grinton and I know pretty well how things stand. What the law might say about you two young scamps I don't know, and I certainly sha'n't enquire, but what *I* say is that you've both been a bit foolish—eh?—and also a bit unfortunate, and so let sleeping dogs lie. You see, I overheard your conversation in the yard before you did your bolt——"

"Was you the bloke that popped up at us?" interposed Freddie, a tinge of indignation in his tone.

"I was that bloke," admitted Peter. "And I know all about the nice new leaf you're both going to turn. But what I don't know—and what I'd like to know—is why you've come back all of a sudden? Let's hear that!"

The youngsters exchanged glances, and then Lizzie stepped forward.

"If yer please, sir," she said, "it was like this. When we comes along the road, somethin' goes by flash and was gorn——"

"Wait a minute!" interposed Peter. "Which road?"

"There yer go—yer ain't tellin' it proper," exclaimed

Freddie. "It was jest arter we left, sir. We was comin' along when we 'ears a car comin', so we 'ides in the 'edge, see, and then this car passes us, and orf it goes——"

"Towards Greystones, or away from it?" Peter interrupted again.

"'E ain't no better," scoffed Lizzie. "It was goin' away from Greystones. And we sees it go by flash, and was gorn. But we see 'oo's in it, and it was the doctor and Miss Vernon, and we thought—though it was all in a flash like—we thought there was somethin' the matter with Miss Vernon—leastways—well, it all 'appened so quick. And then we keeps on thinkin' of it, and about Miss Ayrton, we thought of 'er, too, and I ses to Freddie, 'We didn't orter run away like this,' I ses, 'p'r'aps we could do something.' 'Wot?' he ses. And we talks about it, and at last we turns and comes back, thinkin' we might tell Miss Ayrton, or you, or somebody—and then you met us," she ended, lamely.

"There's a way ter tell it," grunted Freddie.

The professor regarded the two children, and then glanced at Peter.

"Rather sporting, it seems to me," he murmured. "Don't you agree?"

"So sporting," replied Peter, "that I think we may safely add them to our army—that is, if they want to join it." He turned to Freddie. "What you have told us, Freddie, we already knew, or guessed. We are now on our way to Dr. Glade's house, and we are going to get in that house by hook or crook. Would you like to help us? Or, now you've told your story, would you like to scoot off again? Your consciences needn't worry you any more, for you've done your bit."

There was a whispered consultation. Then Freddie stepped forward again.

"We're goin' with yer," he announced. "When yer turns

over a new leaf, yer've got to be down on dirty work."

" 'Ear, 'ear," added Lizzie. "We're doin' it proper!"

So the little party resumed its way, and marched silently along the lane to the left. For over a mile, no one spoke. They were all busy with their private thoughts. Then, as the thoughts began to grow constructive, Freddie suddenly asked,

"Got a plan, guv'nor?"

"Yes, it's this," answered Peter. "You and I, Freddie, will break into the house. It's no good ringing or knocking. When we get inside, our duty will be to locate the room where Miss Vernon and Sir Julius are——"

"Wot's 'locate'?" interrupted Freddie. "Blow up?"

"Good lord, no! To locate is to find. We've got to find out where they are, and then protect them and get them out as best we can. That's the general scheme. We'll have to arrange the details as we go."

"Meanwhile, what do *we* do?" enquired the professor.

"I think you'd better wait outside at first," replied Peter. "We'll let you in if we want you, and if we think it's wise—but we don't want to trip over each other's heels."

"I can scratch," said Lizzie.

"And I can hit," added the professor.

"Then see you jolly well scratch and hit anybody of the enemy who comes popping out,' exclaimed Peter, smiling grimly. "And particularly Dr. Glade, if he slips through our fingers with a big packet under his arm." He gave an exclamation. "Hallo—look there!"

By the side of the road stood a motor-car. Or, more correctly speaking, it leaned there, being partly in a ditch.

"So there *was* an accident, after all," muttered Peter. "But I'll bet it was a prearranged one!"

They continued on their way. The last stage of the journey had now been reached, and all at once, round a hedge, came a view of Dr. Glade's house.

If it had looked sinister to Sir Julius Hughes in the sunlight, it looked doubly sinister now in the pale light of the moon, and with the greater knowledge which those who viewed it now possessed.

They kept to the shadows, and crept quietly up to the gate. One light glimmered. It glimmered from a top room.

"Stay here, and keep concealed," whispered Peter, and, beckoning Freddie to follow him, he began a stealthy detour of the house.

The front of the house was impregnable. There seemed no possible way to enter it without the permission of its owner, or a battering-ram. But a second-floor window at the back was open a crack, and Peter eyed it eagerly

"That branch nearly reaches the window, Freddie," whispered Peter, pointing to a stout limb. "I think, if we climb up to it, and I got on your back, I could reach it."

"Wot abart me gettin' on *your* back?" suggested Freddie.

But Peter shook his head. If it was only possible for one to enter that forbidding house, he was fully determined that he should be the one.

CHAPTER XXXV

IN THE LITTLE TOP ROOM

"AT least," observed Sir Julius, as the door closed and a key turned. "Dr Glade has spared us the horror of solitary confinement. We may suffer in company."

Angela smiled faintly, and strained at the cord that bound her.

"He's a beast!" she murmured. "I didn't know such people could exist!"

"They shouldn't exist," said Sir Julius. "If ever I get free of these ropes, I will go straight to Westminster and table an Act against them. I have been in this room sixteen hours, and have been fed most meagrely."

"It's brave of you to take it so lightly," answered Angela. "I wish I could! But I keep on thinking of Peter—and wonder what's happened to him. Oh, what a fool I was to believe that note! I ought to have guessed that it never came from Detective Druce!"

"I don't see how you could guess—you've nothing to reproach yourself with, my dear," responded Sir Julius. "And once you were outside your room, of course, you were helpless. Don't give up yet. Other people have got out of worse scrapes than we are in. I believe I shall find some way——"

"Sh!" whispered Angela suddenly. "He's coming back!"

They listened. Quiet footsteps were hurrying to the door. A second later, the door was unlocked and opened, and Dr. Glade stood in the aperture.

He fixed his eyes upon them, but it was clear that, at the moment, his mind was elsewhere. His attitude was almost birdlike in its bright watchfulness and acute attention. Then, with an incredibly swift movement, he entered the room and closed the door behind him.

It was evident to the two prisoners in the room that their captor was in a different mood from when he had left them only a minute earlier. What had happened in that brief space to alter his humour? The cynical smile still lurked round the corners of his mouth, and the devilish little crinkles were still round the eyes that, when you peered into their steely depths, denied their kindliness; but something disturbing was also there. A grain of doubt had entered into the doctor's colossal confidence.

Sir Julius was about to speak, but the doctor held up his hand, and as the hand had a revolver in it, the signal was not to be ignored. Five seconds went by. Then a new sound came from the passage outside. Someone appeared to have descended rather abruptly to the ground.

A long silence followed. Sir Julius and Angela felt themselves bursting with the strain, and the doctor fidgeted by the door. Suddenly the doctor's fingers tightened, and he stood a few inches away from the door.

"One word from either of you," he whispered, "and it will be your last!"

Though the words were low, they came with as much emphasis as though they had been shouted. Neither Angela nor Sir Julius disbelieved them.

The door-knob quivered, then slowly turned. The door began to open. As it opened, inwards, the doctor kept behind it.

"Angela!" cried a voice. "Sir Julius!"

The speaker sprang forward; but, as he sprang, the doctor sprang, also, and two who had already struggled to-

gether in a darkened sitting-room at Greystones now faced each other again. Only, this time, the doctor had the added advantage of a revolver which he was pressing into his adversary's chest.

"Get back to the wall!" he commanded. "And when you hear me speak, don't imagine you are listening to the fools you've been dealing with over at the other house. *What I say I mean!*"

"Peter—be careful!" cried Angela, in terror.

For something reckless had gleamed in Peter's eye for a moment, and she had recognised it. Restraint and self-control appeared to have reached their limit in that sane young man's composition, and a distinct redness was floating in his vision.

But the storm did not burst, and an immediate tragedy was saved. Taking a deep breath, Peter slowly backed to the wall, stood there waiting.

"Well?" he queried, coolly.

"Good! I see you are sensible," answered the doctor. "Now, pray, go on being sensible, and answer my questions. How did you get here?"

"By the simple process of walking. You drove, I understand—in company."

He glanced towards Angela. Dr. Glade smiled slightly.

"Yes, I had that advantage," he said. "How did you know she was here?"

"She left your forged note behind. The note you wrote and signed with Druce's name. You murdered Druce, of course?"

Dr. Glade regarded his interrogator fixedly, then nodded.

"Yes, I killed Druce," he answered. "We went to the cottage to see John Elderly's body. And, while we were there, it occurred to me that Druce might as well remain. You see," he added, with a malicious twist of his features, "he couldn't complain. It was he who had killed John Elderly."

"So I understand," observed Peter.

"Oh? You knew that?" exclaimed the doctor. "No, my dear sir, don't move, I pray. You've no notion how dead serious I am at this moment!"

"I've got quite a good notion," retorted Peter. "With a record like yours, and a hundred thousand pounds to clear out with, you'd be likely to be serious——"

"Silence! I don't want your personal opinions! How did you know that Druce killed John Elderly? Tell me that, and be quick about it!"

"Quinn told me," answered Peter, quietly. "He told me the whole thing, from A to Z."

"So Quinn told you?" remarked Dr. Glade, his eyes ever watchful. "I see. Quinn doubtless made quite a good story of it—he's a silly boaster, and has been longing for this chance. Yes, he would do a foolish thing like that. Unless," he added suddenly, "he had some special reason for telling you?"

On the verge of a fatal slip, Peter pulled himself up.

"He had no special reason," he lied. "He told me, as you say, out of vanity. You see, he'd got me bound up, and thought I was helpless—but he can't bind a fellow quite as well as you can," concluded Peter, with a glance at Angela and Sir Julius.

It was a pretty touch. Dr. Glade's eyes gleamed with satisfaction, while Peter congratulated himself on the fact that he had withheld the genuine reason why he had heard the story of Greystones. He did not want Dr. Glade to know that a humble workman had drawn the story from Quinn, and that the humble workman was a Scotland Yard official. At least, he did not want Dr. Glade to know just yet.

"Quinn is a fool, and always was one," said the doctor, with professional criticism. "He . . . Mr. Armstrong, if you move again, I will shoot you. . . . He bungled his busi-

ness from the start—really, it quite amused me when I heard some of the things he had done. He loves red herrings, does Quinn. That shot you heard soon after the bogus police arrived—that was one of Quinn's red herrings. He fired it himself. The ringing of the library bell—another red herring. It was to give colour, of course, to the disappearance of the butler, Davis, so that he might reappear as Detective Druce." He chuckled. "I must admit, the whole scheme was quite a pretty one, but it needed a genius to carry it out."

"They called you in," observed Peter, dryly.

"Ah, but I was a mere outsider," replied Dr. Glade, his sardonic amusement growing. "A mere outsider, I assure you. Spiritually, as well as actually, I was never a member of their set. Mr. Elderly and I were—h'm, friends—and I only went to Greystones once or twice, and then only for a few minutes. Mrs. Catesby understood that, in any difficulty, I was to be sent for—that was all. For the rest, Mr. Elderly and I had just our own private understanding." He broke off. "Where are they all now? What are they doing?"

"I don't see why I should give you any information," growled Peter.

"Then you must be quite blind," replied Dr. Glade. "In five seconds you may see."

Peter shrugged his shoulders. After all, it was his business to play for time.

"They are on their way to Freshways," said Peter; and all at once it occurred to him that the more he conveyed the idea of security to Dr. Glade, the longer he would hold him. "They got the wind up, and did a bunk. Of course, they know they've lost that little packet they've been searching for, but they're reduced now to looking after their precious skins."

Delight shone in the doctor's eyes. Peter was now watching him as closely as he himself was being watched. He was wondering whether there might not be some weak point in the

doctor's armour—some human foible he could twist to his advantage.

"Sauve qui peut, eh?" murmured the doctor. "Well, that's really interesting. And—quite pleasant!"

"Pleasant because they won't be coming to bother you here?" suggested Peter.

"Oh, no, I wasn't thinking of that," answered Dr. Glade. "I was thinking how pleasant Mr. Elderly would find your news, if he were alive to hear it. You see, Mr. Elderly was a very cute man, and he had visioned just such a situation as this, and, as far as he could, had prepared for it. What do you think of this, for a clever little plan? You know, of course, that with the money in the secret panel was a little black list. You know that?"

"Yes, I know it," returned Peter.

"Well—kindly take your hand out of your pocket—thank you—Mr. Elderly anticipated that his death might be welcome to more than one member of his queer community—he was rather an autocrat, you know, and made full use of his power—and so he invented a little scheme to keep them in order. Every day, as regularly as clockwork, he sent a note to his solicitor, and none of his happy little family knew who his solicitor was. All they knew was that these letters went each day, and that the solicitor had orders to forward a sealed note to Scotland Yard on the very first morning that the usual letter did not turn up. The note informed Scotland Yard that John Elderly had been murdered, and, together with certain other information, mentioned where to find the little black book and the money."

"The little black book I can understand," said Peter, "but why the money?"

Dr. Glade smiled.

"Having been in Mr. Elderly's confidence, I can tell you," he answered. "Elderly was—h'm—rather a miser, eh? Rather

jealous of his position, eh? He wanted the money himself—failing that, he did not want any of his lesser folk to step into his shoes. For would not the lesser folk have murdered him? Oh, his process of reasoning was quite easy to follow, I think."

"By Jove!" exclaimed Peter, suddenly. "Elderly didn't post his letter yesterday, then—and Scotland Yard will be all round Greystones in no time!"

He could have bitten his tongue off the next moment, for this thought was one he did not wish Dr. Glade to share. It would precipitate his departure. But the doctor continued to smile, and was not in the least worried.

"Yesterday was Saturday, and to-day, when it dawns, will be Sunday," he said. "Mr. Elderly always ran a greater risk at the week-ends—though whether he was murdered on Saturday by design or by accident is a moot point. The fact that the birds have flown with such unnecessary hurry suggests that they were unaware of their advantage. The solicitor will not miss his morning letter till Monday, you note, so—we have well over thirty hours before us. Otherwise, my young friend, I would not remain here talking—no, even *your* subtlety could not make me do that."

Peter was slightly dashed by the doctor's shrewdness, but consoled himself with his private knowledge that Scotland Yard was moving at least thirty hours before its allotted time.

"I believe you think you're as clever as John Elderly was," he observed, sarcastically.

"Frankly, I believe I do," admitted Dr. Glade, and paused for an instant before adding, "You see, *I* know where John Elderly is."

"Where is he?" asked Peter.

"In Australia," replied Dr. Glade.

"What?" cried Peter, in astonishment.

The room span. Sir Julius gave an exclamation, and Angela

strained forward breathlessly. Watching his amazed audience, Dr. Glade smiled almost humanly.

"Yes, that is where John Elderly lies at this moment," he went on. "You see, the man *you* knew as John Elderly wasn't John Elderly at all. He met him there some years ago, after having served a term of imprisonment in the old country that had somewhat embittered him and had shown him the hollowness of life. This man, I may tell you, was hit on the head by a jailer, but you need not imagine that the blow turned him insane. On the contrary, it provided him with sanity, it brought daylight. And when the man went to Australia—purely for personal convenience, not out of any sense of shame—he bumped into John Elderly in a mining district, had a quarrel—and killed him.

"He killed my uncle?" cried Angela. "This man—murdered my uncle?"

"He might have been murdered himself, Miss Vernon," Dr. Glade pointed out blandly. "Australia is a rough country, you know. I have been there myself, and have smelt the wildness of the lonely districts. And, in any case, you had never seen your uncle, had you? No, of course, you had not. Nobody in England seems to have seen John Elderly, who went away as a little boy and was only on the point of returning to take up his inheritance when he—died."

"Then it was an impostor who came back and lived at Greystones under my dead uncle's name," interposed Angela.

"Precisely. An impostor. He thought it a pity that the inheritance should go begging for an owner——"

"It wouldn't have gone begging," Peter interrupted, warmly. "I assume Miss Vernon would have inherited it!"

"A male owner, perhaps I should have said," the doctor corrected himself. "So he stepped into John Elderly's shoes, and returned in his place. It was a tempting bait, you will admit, for a man who had no possessions of his own, no name

he wanted to admit, no position—and no reason to love the world? It was his low opinion of the world that caused him to offer refuge to others who were against it. A regular Jekyll and Hyde, eh? He smiled on one side of his face, and frowned on the other."

There was a silence. In the strange mosaic of Greystones, the pieces were falling into position with a vengeance. But one piece still had to be adjusted and explained.

"But who are *you*," cried Sir Julius, harshly. "Where do *you* come into all this?"

"I?" said Dr. Glade, and his eyes grew suddenly brighter. "Oh, I am nobody in particular. I am merely the man who took John Elderly's place."

"But he's—dead," gasped Sir Julius, as something seemed to snap inside him.

"No, believe me, I am not dead," replied Dr. Glade. "I merely feigned death when I was set upon in the cottage, and after they left me, I managed to crawl away and assume my other self. Occasionally I found it useful to see my little community without being seen. Then I became Dr. Glade. And most useful," he added, raising his left hand and slightly lifting his wig, "Dr. Glade has been."

The next moment, he swung round. A large, rough stone had crashed through the window.

The stone did not hit the doctor, yet it proved his undoing. Peter was on him in a flash, and for a second time they rolled to the ground and struggled together.

The doctor swung on top, and Angela closed her eyes. The second that followed was the worst she had ever experienced, and the sudden sound of a shot the most terrifying. When she opened her eyes at last, Peter was picking himself up shakily from the ground. Dr. Glade lay dead on the floor, and a ragged workman, with a smoking pistol, stood in the doorway.

CHAPTER XXXVI

THE REBIRTH OF GREYSTONES

DAY had not yet broken when a car that had once belonged to Dr. Glade drew up outside the lodge gate of Greystones. Four people alighted. The fifth, who was in the driver's seat, waved his hand, and continued on his way.

The four people were a happy young couple, a sleepy professor, and a grave M.P. They paused a moment at the gate, while little dark memories slipped hither and thither across its bars; but they were memories only, and the gate had now ceased to be an evil thing; and suddenly, with a boyish laugh, the young man seized it and swung it forward.

"No need to worry this time!" he exclaimed. "The shadows have gone!"

"Yes, one is entitled to presume so," murmured the professor.

They entered, and as they approached the house the girl drew closer to her companion.

"What a strange home-coming, Peter!" she whispered.

"Yes, but there's something rather wonderful in it, don't you think?" he whispered back. "It's as though—as though the old place were being reborn, Angela! Don't you feel it?"

She nodded.

The door of the house was open, and a shaft of yellow light lay across the ground. In the doorway stood a figure.

"Friends all, Miss Ayrton!" called Peter, softly.

Miss Ayrton came forward, peering anxiously into the darkness.

"Are you all here?" she asked, anxiously.

"All but Mr. Jessop," replied Peter, and added quickly, "Don't worry about him, though. He's perfectly safe, and he'll be with us before long."

"I hope so," said Miss Ayrton, with a little shudder. "He's gone on to Freshways, I suppose?"

"Yes, by the road. He thought he could just make it. Wanted to be in at the death, you know."

They went inside. The lounge hall glowed cheerfully, and tea-cups and a large pot added to the pleasant welcome.

"Now, indeed, that is excellent!" exclaimed Professor Grinton, rubbing his hands. "Comfort at last! And one thought never to experience it again!"

Sir Julius said nothing, but his eyes spoke. He had suffered, in the physical sense, longer than any of them.

"What happened?" asked Miss Ayrton simply, as she busied herself with the pot.

Tea takes the edge off horror. While they drank, Peter related the incidents that had occurred at Dr. Glade's house. He made as light of them as he could, but they were grave enough, and Miss Ayrton shuddered as he described the final scene.

"It was that stone through the window that saved the situation," he said. "I was watching Dr. Glade closely all the while, and, although he was a bit discursive towards the end —he imagined he had us all on toast, you see—he never took a chance or let his mind wander. But that stone—well, it made us all jump—and it was the moment I'd been waiting for."

"Who threw the stone?" asked Miss Ayrton, as Peter paused.

"Yes, I wondered that," answered Peter, "when I got up from the floor and found the doctor with a bullet in him. Whew—that was a nasty moment! You see, old Jessop was

standing at the door, and it was he who had fired—but it couldn't have been him who threw the stone through the window."

"No, it was I who threw that stone," said the professor, interposing unexpectedly. "The best throw I have ever made in my life, I flatter myself—and also the most useful. I never dreamt I should hit the window. Really, I don't know to this moment how I did it. Some remnant of my old cricketing days, I expect. Youth does not desert us entirely."

Peter smiled, and explained.

"When Mr. Jessop left you, Miss Ayrton," he said, "he came straight to the doctor's house. I was already inside, and I could never have reached the window I climbed through but for Freddie's assistance. Freddie wanted to follow me, but as nobody could climb up to the branch and give him a leg up, and as he was several inches shorter than myself, he was beaten. So, Mr. Jessop found all three of them—Freddie, Lizzie, and Mr. Grinton—waiting in the garden.

"Then Freddie helped *him* through the window, which was at the back of the house, and when he had crept to the front attic and had listened to what was going on there, he returned to the back window and called out his instructions. Freddie was to throw a stone through the attic window to divert the doctor's attention, and then Jessop would dash in and cover him."

"But Freddie's stone went over the roof," interposed the professor again, "so I seized one, and threw more accurately."

"You bet you did," laughed Peter. "And it did the trick! The only thing that went wrong was that, when Jessop entered, he had to be more drastic than he had intended. Dr. Glade and I were rolling on the floor, and it was quite clear that one of us was going to get killed. Jessop chose that the one should be Dr. Glade."

Angela, who was sitting close to Peter, suddenly took his

hand. Peter squeezed it unashamedly. It occurred to him that he owed a great deal to Detective Jessop—his life and all the glory that was to reside in it.

"Jessop did not enter the room with the idea of killing Dr. Glade," remarked Sir Julius, thoughtfully, "but I can't help thinking it is just as well that he was forced to fire that shot. It ends matters finally, and will save a tremendous amount of trouble. May I have another cup of tea, Miss Vernon? I am aware that this will make my fourth, but to-night, or this morning, or whatever it is, I feel rather privileged." As Angela took his cup, he glanced at her and added, "There is one rather interesting point that has to be settled. What happens to the money?"

"The point is already settled, as far as I am concerned, Sir Julius," replied Angela, quietly. "I don't touch a penny of it. You take two lumps, don't you?"

A vague weight which Peter had hardly been conscious of was lifted from that young man's soul. Angela without a hundred thousand pounds would be easier to woo than Angela with it.

"I applaud your sentiment, Miss Vernon," continued Sir Julius, "but a portion of the money may be quite untainted. After all, I assume your real uncle, who died in Australia, must have inherited some of it. And the house, in any case, would appear to be yours."

"Then I'll move an amendment," said Angela. "I'll not touch a penny, or a stone, until it's been proved to be mine by moral as well as legal right."

"I applaud that sentiment even more," smiled Sir Julius. "The lawyers will be able to settle all that for you—and, meanwhile, may I regard myself as your temporary solicitor and adviser?"

"You're awfully good," answered Angela. "I'd—I'd love you to——"

"Until she gets another," Peter concluded for her. "I understand there's a second applicant, Sir Julius, for the honour."

"When the other applicant establishes his claim, I shall be only too happy to step down," responded Sir Julius. "You forget, my offer was merely a temporary one—and I assume my successor requires a more permanent job." Angela flushed, and looked at Peter reprovingly, while Sir Julius turned to Miss Ayrton, who was standing a little apart. "Miss Ayrton," he said, in a low voice, "my offer to Miss Vernon applies equally to you. If there is anything I can do in the way of help or advice, you have only to command me."

She turned to him. Her mouth quivered, but her voice was steady.

"You offer that," she asked, "knowing that I have committed murder?"

"The murder you committed," replied Sir Julius, "was one I should have required a daughter of my own to commit, in similar circumstances."

Miss Ayrton turned away again quickly, and Angela ran to her. John Elderly's secretary had broken down at last.

"Of course, what she's worrying about is old Jessop," murmured Peter, as the three men drew apart. "Lord—wouldn't it be too horrible if anything happened to him at Freshways?"

"God bless me, don't think of it!" exclaimed the professor.

But they could not help thinking of it. Throughout every minute of the hour that followed, they kept thinking of it, and but for its effect on Angela and also its practical futility, Peter would have crossed the hills and gone to Freshways himself. It occurred to him, however, that with so many unpleasant possibilities still abroad, the women should not be deprived of a minimum of male protection. He, the professor, and Sir Julius had been deputed by Detective Jessop to remain at Greystones, just as Freddie and Lizzie had been

deputed to remain on guard at the doctor's house. If things went wrong at Freshways, or if there were any escapes, the homing instinct might yet bring some unwelcome persons back to the sanctuary in which they had sheltered for so long.

So Peter stayed, and five tired people watched the night outside turn gradually to grey. Or, more correctly speaking, four people watched, for one—a grey-haired professor—gave up at last, and sank back into the comfortable cushions, to dream of flowers that slew each other, and orchids that turned into dragons.

Presently Angela felt a light touch on her sleeve.

"I say, Angela," whispered Peter, "let's go out. I'm simply fed up in here, aren't you?"

She smiled, and rose. Quietly they slipped from the hall; and Sir Julius, watching them, smiled too.

The birds were stirring in the trees outside. As they passed across the lawn to the rose-garden, faint rustlings and twitterings came to them. And the rustlings were no longer ominous, as they had been in the blackness of the night, while the twitterings spoke of the coming light, and of joy, and rebirth.

For awhile they said nothing. The peace was too wonderful to break. But when they reached the little gate that led to the hills, Peter suddenly laughed.

"What's the joke?" asked Angela, as the spell was broken.

"Don't think I know, exactly," replied Peter. "I just felt like it."

"I know," nodded Angela, her eyes shining. "I feel like it, too."

Over the eastern hills came a golden glimmer.

"Soon that'll grow," said Peter. "Let's watch it. It'll grow from a tiny light till it turns the whole of Greystones into a

brilliant, illuminated thing—Greystones, that has been sombre for so many hours, and so full of menace, and so cold to the touch! Amazing thing, the sun is, isn't it?"

"Amazing," agreed Angela.

She was in a mood to agree to anything.

"But it's only life, when all's said and done," proceeded Peter, imagining himself poetic, but actually responding to the call of life himself in attempting to swing the conversation round into personal channels. "It's the sun that brings life to the cold earth—and that can light up more than just a collection of bricks and mortar. I say, Angela—you'll have to paint another picture of Greystones now, won't you?"

She smiled.

"That depends," she said. "Is Greystones going to be a happy place in the future?"

"By Jove, that's *almost* a leading question!" exclaimed Peter, delightedly. "I'll answer it. Greystones is going to be the happiest place in the world—for two people."

"Caretakers?" she queried.

He was about to reply when a figure came over the brow of a hill, silhouetted against the widening space of brilliance. They recognized its outline at once. Detective Jessop had returned from Freshways.

"Hallo!" called Peter, as soon as the approaching figure was within earshot. "All's well?"

"A number of people at Freshways might not agree," replied the detective, "but, from our point of view, all is very well."

"Bravo!" exclaimed Peter. "It seems to me you've carried out a ticklish job very brilliantly. Was there a big fuss?"

"No fuss at all. They just walked right into it," answered the detective. "We had a whole army waiting for them and

the odds were all against them—as well as the position. Some forty people, when they have finished their sentences, will be just thirsting for my death!"

"My hat!" murmured Peter. "Who'd be a detective?"

Jessop smiled.

"We each choose what we're fitted for, and there's a risk in everything," he said. "Merely to be alive is to risk death, and only when death has got us does the risk end. So why worry?"

"*We're* not worrying," Peter assured him, with a glance at Angela. "And we're just about to take the most fearful risk!"

"Don't listen to him, Mr. Jessop," advised Angela. "The sun's got into his head."

"It has," admitted Peter. "And it's going into my head more and more every minute."

"How's everything at the house?" asked Jessop.

"Everything's fine at the house," Peter assured him, "and everything's waiting for you at the house, too, or I'm a sinner. Why don't you pop off? Can't you see we just hate your company?"

Jessop laughed; and proceeded on his way.

"Whoever would have thought," chuckled Peter, "that a detective like Jessop would be sentimental? Now, any ordinary mortal would have motored back from Freshways—but he just wanted to walk back over the hills, so that he could dream as the dawn broke!"

"How do you know that was the reason?" asked Angela. "His car may have been commandeered."

"I don't know—it's only a guess," retorted Peter, "but I'll bet it's a good guess. I've a hunch that Jessop is quite a human little fellow beneath his waistcoat. But, good Lord, what are we talking about Jessop for? He's utterly unimportant. About ourselves, now . . ."

Five minutes later, the sun burst over the hill, and sent its radiance over them.

"We're discovered!" cried Peter. "Well, well, who cares? Let all the world know! I say, Angela, about forty thousand years ago I suggested a walk. There's no storm brewing now —shall we take it?"

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